

Migrant workers' rights

Country's growth prospects depend on how we uphold them

HERE has never been dearth of reports, comments and recommendations on the plight of Bangladeshi migrant workers, but in spite of all these, there is hardly any palpable difference in their condition. And the reason for this has to do with the lack of a holistic approach to the matter. At best there have been piecemeal, ad-hoc and fragmentary measures that have done little to resolve the problems that beset the manpower export sector.

It is unfortunate but true that the workers' travails start from the time they put in their papers at home and continue till such time they return home, most of them worse off than when they had left. Given that this is the sector that contributes the most to our foreign exchange coffers, lack of substantive action on the part of the government is unacceptable.

It is not merely a matter of identifying the racket at home and in the receiving countries, as averred to recently by the foreign minister. And surely, the cost of getting jobs abroad must be made less, but that is only a part of the problem. In this regard one may ask as to what has happened to the idea of providing bank loans to those seeking employment abroad so that they do not have to sell their last possession and be left at the mercy of some dubious manpower agent and money lenders.

What about the pay and perks that are promised to our workers only to find after landing that they have become victims of deceit of a fraud network? There is nexus between the home and foreign operatives that give our workers a raw deal at both the ends, and something must be done to put an end to this.

There is indeed an urgent need to gear up our missions abroad, but we wonder whether merely revamping the missions without a clear guideline from home and strict oversight and coordinated action by the relevant ministries would help ameliorate the sufferings of our migrant workers. If the oft repeated complaints of the workers that our missions are not very labour friendly are to be given credence, then it is the mindset of our diplomats that needs to be changed.

It is thus a case of approaching the issue in a holistic manner and we can think of no other ministry than the Ministry of Expatriate Affairs to play the part of the coordinating body to synchronise the efforts of the labour, commerce and the foreign ministries in this regard. It was precisely for this purpose that this ministry was formed and we are not convinced that it has lived up to our expectation.

Junta should heed global opinion on Suu Kyi

UN must get tougher with Myanmar

BAN Ki-moon has put the situation in perspective. He has described his visit to Myanmar a very tough mission. No one will take issue with him here, for the matter he has uppermost on his mind is the detention and ongoing trial of the country's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. With global opinion getting deeply sensitive over the continued incarceration of Suu Kyi, it was inevitable that the United Nations would get a little more involved in the matter. Indeed, the world body has been involved in the Suu Kyi issue, as the repeated visits to Myanmar over the past few years by its special envoy Ibrahim Gambari has demonstrated. Now that it is the UN secretary general who has felt the urgency of making his own trip to Yangon, it should dawn on the military junta led by General Than Shwe that a continued brushing aside of opinion on Suu Kyi's circumstances does the country little good.

We at this newspaper are supportive of Ban Ki-moon's mission. That is because of our belief that Aung San Suu Kyi deserves a fairer deal than what she has come by so far. For the past fourteen years, she has been in house arrest; and for the past couple of months she has been in the notorious Insein prison on charges of having violated the terms of her detention because an American happened to swim across a lake to see her. Given the worldwide support that the detained politician has enjoyed since 1990, when she led her National League for Democracy to a resounding victory at the general elections (the results were subsequently repudiated by the junta), it is only proper and ethical that Suu Kyi be set free. It is in the interest of Myanmar's future that the junta should engage in a dialogue with her about turning the country on to a healthy, democratic course. At a time when democracy has been supplanting authoritarian rule across the globe, it makes sense to argue that Myanmar's military rulers should heed global opinion and move toward negotiating a way out of the crisis with Ms. Suu Kyi. Their failure to be responsive to the contemporary world is deeply saddening for the people of Myanmar as also for people elsewhere.

The people of Bangladesh have always striven for meaningful and productive relations with Myanmar despite the issues which sometimes come between the two countries. Since Dhaka believes that the voice of the people is eventually the voice that matters, it expects that a similar perception will soon define politics in Yangon. Meanwhile, we wish the UN secretary general good luck on his difficult mission.

Moral authority

Is it not natural that before demanding trials of the alleged wrong-doers during the emergency, when the fundamental rights of the people were constitutionally suspended anyway, trials should be held for those perpetrators who indulged themselves in more severe crimes during her regime?

MOZAMMEL H KHAN

THE leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia, on the eve of International Day against Torture, urged the government to immediately take effective steps to investigate each incident of "repression on politicians, businessmen and citizens" during the emergency period and hold trials of the people responsible. She also appealed to the United Nations to take necessary steps for encouraging the government to take such initiatives.

This is indeed a befitting statement from the leader of the opposition of a democratic country. However, as far as Khaleda Zia and her five-year rule is concerned, it would be only natural to ask if she possesses the moral authority to ask for the trials of the perpetrators of the alleged crimes committed during the past caretaker government.

If one reflects back to what happened following the general election of October 2001, it would be obvious that all the alleged crimes Khaleda Zia is talking about now, the modes of many of those were invented whereas the others reached their peak only during her dreadful rule.

Torture in remand, custodial torture and death, extra-judicial killing through so-called "Operation Clean Heart" and "crossfire" remain the hallmark of the BNP-Jamaat regime. Remand became such a widely abused phenomenon to torture the political opponents that one of our revered retired chief justices wrote a poem entitled "The State is on Remand."

New methods were invented by the BNP activists to torture the opposition political workers and religious minority. Torture, rapes, and killings became the rule of the day. Hundreds of opposition political activists, including personalities like S.A.M.S. Kibria and Ahasanullah Master, were killed, and thousands were driven out from their homes.

Investigations by the criminal investigation department became a mockery, where innocent people were arrested and made to confess to crimes they had never committed.

Every judicial investigation (whose reports were never made public) apparently pointed to "foreign" involvement.

Violations of human rights were so rampant that international conferences were held in many capitals of the western world, including the House of Lords (with Lord Avebury as prime mover), to press the Bangladesh government to redress the situations. The author of this piece attended and organised more than one such conference, and kept constant communications with UNHRC about the despicable human right situations in Bangladesh.

It was during her tenure that free-thinker and author Muntasir Mamoon, human rights activist Shahriar Kabir, politicians of the like of Saber Hossain Chowdhury, journalists Enamul Hoque Chowdhury and Selim Samad (who had to take asylum in Canada) were arrested and abused in custody.

At the end of the investigations, even when she was at the helm of the state, the accusations brought against them were found to be absolutely unfounded.

It was during her rule, before any opposition political program, thousands of people, many of them innocent bystanders, were arrested, bundled in police vans and were locked behind bar for indefinite period, for reasons totally unknown to them and their keens.

Is it not natural that before demanding trials of the alleged wrong-doers during the emergency, when the fundamental rights of the people were constitutionally suspended anyway, trials should be held for those perpetrators who indulged themselves in more severe crimes during her regime?

In her statement the leader of the opposition termed the past caretaker government an unconstitutional one. Here again, the natural question would be whether the Iajuddin-led government that preceded the last CTG was a constitutional one to start with.

In fact, the seed of the Fakhruddin-led



Does she possess the moral authority to demand trials?

CTG was sowed itself in the unconstitutionality of Iajuddin's take-over as the CTG chief, by-passing a number of provisions of the constitution. And it was known to the nation who was behind Iajuddin's decision to declare himself the chief adviser of the CTG and his subsequent actions as a remote control chief adviser to materialise her nefarious agenda.

Even when a bench of the honourable High Court, in response to a writ petition challenging the constitutional legality of the Iajuddin government, was about to deliver its ruling, it was apparent to the nation who manipulated the then-CJ, in a manner with no precedent in the operation of higher judiciary, in suspending the issuance of the ruling at the last minute.

As a citizen of a democratic country and more so as the leader of the parliamentary opposition of the parliament, constituted out of the most free and fair election in Bangladesh's electoral history, she has all the legal rights to ask for the trials for wrong-doings committed by government machinery of any past government.

However, her moral right to demand the investigations and trials loses much of the ground when she fails to include and apologise for the similar offences committed during her own tenure, which in magnitude, severity and number, far outweigh what happened during the tenure of the last CTG.

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It takes two

It is an irony of fate that the dust Mr. Matin wanted to brush off from others' coats quietly found its place for shelter in the well-trimmed suit of Mr. Matin himself. It is now up to him to come out clean. If he can, we shall be happy.

HUSAIN IMAM

A parliamentary sub-committee is probing corruption charges against M.A. Matin, who was shipping adviser of the caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. One allegation against Mr. Matin, so far disclosed by the sub-committee, is that he awarded the contract for container handling of Chittagong Port without going through the proper tender procedures.

Mr. Matin reportedly signed the work order for Ishak Brothers just an hour before the oath-taking of the incumbent government. The entire process, from initiating proposal to issuing work order, took hardly four days.

The other allegation is that he enhanced the retirement age of the pilots of Chittagong Port from 57 to 60 almost unilaterally and without any legal authority.

Interestingly, Mr. Matin was also the chief architect behind the so-called crusade against corruption launched by the

caretaker government during its tenure. His boastful announcement not to let off anybody, big or small, had been the talk of the town for quite some time.

According to the officials of the Shipping Ministry and Chittagong Port Authority who were involved in the deal, including the then shipping secretary, Mr. Matin forced them to commit many irregularities, including the container handling deal.

True, government officers are often required to work under pressure from powerful quarters, but could we accept a similar explanation in this case, especially if we consider the time when the deal was accomplished?

The election was over. The joint forces had already wound up their business. An elected political government was about to take oath. Why on earth would there be any fear or compulsion for these officers at that very moment to carry out an illegal order so promptly and efficiently?

We all know it well that if there is any job permanent in the country it is that of a

government servant. It is easy to remove a minister, even a president, in this country, but not a government servant. It is hard to believe that these officers did not know it.

One reason could have been that Mr. Matin or somebody on his behalf coerced them, but we haven't heard them say so. Another explanation could be that they also received their share of the cake, and now they are trying to pass the buck to the boss. It is now up to the sub-committee to take stock of the whole situation and do the needful.

For corruption to take place, you need at least two hands. One is the giver and the other is the receiver. One hand has to be invariably that of a government servant or bureaucrat. The other is that of the public. He may be anybody, a businessman, a professional, or an ordinary citizen. If any wrong-doing in government deals has to be properly and justifiably dealt with, the nexus as a whole has to be looked into.

The political parties, having failed to trust each other in conducting national elections in a free and fair manner, opted for a caretaker government with people of high esteem, clean image, and neutral position in the society. The two interim caretaker governments, one under Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in 1991 and the other under Justice Habibur Rahman in 1996, served the purpose well.

The system began to erode from the day Justice Latifur Rahman took over office as the chief adviser and started taking controversial decisions one after another. The system has now come under serious scrutiny because of most disgraceful and controversial role played by Professor Iajuddin Ahmed in conducting the affairs as the chief of the caretaker government as well as president of the country.

It is unfortunate that the role of some of the advisers of the last two caretaker governments of Professor Iajuddin Ahmed and Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed in exercising official authority had to be called into question. Mr. Matin is not the only person who is facing allegation for corruption or abuse of power.

The story of the last caretaker government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, that, in the name of cleansing, wrecked havoc all around, especially in the political and business circle, and Mr. Matin played a key role in the episode, is all fresh in the minds of the people.

It is an irony of fate that the dust Mr. Matin wanted to brush off from others' coats quietly found its place for shelter in the well-trimmed suit of Mr. Matin himself. It is now up to him to come out clean. If he can, we shall be happy.

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.

The 2012 campaign begins

The final proof that Palin has no intention of fading away is that she quoted Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who was only pretending to fade away (from his perch addressing a joint session of Congress). "MacArthur said, 'We're not retreating, we're advancing in another direction,'" she concluded. So is Palin, south and east, from Lake Wasilla to the Potomac.

JONATHAN ALTER

It could be wrong. Maybe there's a huge scandal about to swamp Sarah Palin. Maybe she'll take a gig as a Fox News pundit. But my gut tells me we just heard the rough draft of her announcement speech for her 2012 presidential campaign. What did her kids all say "yes" to (and one, "hell yeah!")? Going to Disney World in the lower 48? I don't think so.

The speech was more prepared than early

pundits have indicated. It was clearly shaped with the help of some minor league political professionals. All the platitudes were there in their faded glory:

- "From the shores of Maine to Texas and California."
- "God bless our military."
- "No more conventional politics as usual."
- "Make a positive difference outside Alaska."

Palin's recitation of her record as governor no doubt sounds impressive to Republican

and some independent ears:

- A gas line project that was the biggest private sector energy development ever ("this is energy independence").
- "Bipartisan ethics reform."
- "Unprecedented support for education."
- "Slowed growth of government."
- "Made no lobbyist friends."

In fact, she said, in words one can almost hear in 2011 in Iowa, her goal was to do this all in four years but "we did it in two."

Palin is the Nixon of our time, and the "point guard going through the full court press with her head up" speech was almost Checkersesque. Nobody in the media was going to make Nixon give up the family dog or block Palin's bounce pass under the basket. The troops, she says, "know life is short and choose not to waste time." They know Sarah should leave Alaska and seek her destiny. What nerve. Even Nixon never used American troops abroad to rationalise political ambition. (On second thought,

wasn't that what his 1972 campaign was all about?)

Nixon famously said, "I'm not a quitter" (before quitting). Palin said people who "plod along" on "the worthless path" have taken "the quitters way out." She actually quit while attacking quitters. For a certain kind of numbskull, that counts as smooth. Now she's free to be feted by conservatives in every state. She didn't really quit, you see. She just quit holding back in her search for liberal prey.

The final proof that Palin has no intention of fading away is that she quoted Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who was only pretending to fade away (from his perch addressing a joint session of Congress). "MacArthur said, 'We're not retreating, we're advancing in another direction,'" she concluded. So is Palin, south and east, from Lake Wasilla to the Potomac.

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