

Is a human life worth only Tk. 5,000?

My point is that, paradoxical as it might sound, only if we put a monetary value to life would we be able to value and save human lives. If power generation has a market value, and human life does not, then soon we'll have power generation taking precedence over projects that positively affect human life and health, protect our ecology, and improve quality of life.

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

A few days ago, one news item caught my attention. It was reported that workers in the ship-breaking industry receive little or no compensation for injury or death at the workplace. It was reported on a web site that "only a nominal amount of compensation is given and often only when there is public pressure." If this is the state of affairs in this large industry, one can imagine that the situation is not much better in medium and small-scale industries. One can hardly emphasise that this condition needs to change, the sooner the better.

The issue of the adequate compensation for workers is tied to a larger topic: the value of life and health of Bangladeshi workers. What is the value of life of a Bangladeshi? Some of our readers will undoubtedly be taken aback at the crass nature of this question. I will admit that even in very enlightened academic circles and conferences in the US this question has often been met with surprise and disdain, or both. A common reaction is: "Of course, life is valuable, but how can you put a monetary value to it, at a par with other tangible objects?"

Others have said, even if you can assign a numerical value, also known as a statistical value, to a human life, it is not to be used as a yardstick for any policy decisions. My goal in this article is to share with you some thoughts and ideas that have been gaining ground in

recent years.

Let us consider the case of the lives lost and the injuries caused during the demolition of Rangs Tower in Farm Gate. While I don't want to point fingers at anyone, I know in my heart that these deaths were preventable. Each of these construction workers had a family to support, and they were working in the demolition of the building without any understanding of the risks involved in the work they signed up for.

It can be surmised that they weren't told of the risks, nor do I think their wages included a premium for the higher risk involved in this type of work. I was informed that the families did receive some compensation, but even at a generous rate, their lost lives wouldn't have been sufficiently compensated for their family. My point is, if Bangladesh lawmakers pass a bill to require compensation of work-related deaths, in line with the concept of "statistical value of lives lost," developers and contractors will be paying more attention to safety and precautionary measures at job sites in future.

Other countries faced with similar situations have adopted this compensation practice. After the 9/11 attacks in the US, when more than 2,900 lives were lost in the collapse of the World Trade Center, the US Congress decided to offer cash compensation to the families who had lost a member. One interesting aspect of the program was, the government used a well-accepted formula to

calculate the value of each life, and, as a result, the amount offered to the survivors was not equal for each life lost. Some got as much as 10 million while others received less than 1 million. While most people would be reluctant to assign a dollar value to the life of a dear one, nearly 98% of the families who lost a member in the 9/11 attack settled with the government, in other words they accepted the monetary compensation as adequate, or in simple terms, the price was acceptable.

How did this happen? Without getting into too much details, allow me to summarise the principle: the amount of compensation in each case was determined by a formula that gave consideration to a deceased's age, annual salary, field of profession, education, and a few other factors that were deemed relevant to an individual's lifetime earning capacity. For example, a lawyer from a top school making six figures was considered worth more than another middle-aged individual who made a five-figure salary working for the building maintenance company.

A few years ago, while working on Bangladesh national environmental policy, I proposed that in order to prioritise our environmental problems and to determine how much we could allocate to addressing these problems, it was worth looking at the number of lives saved and health outcomes of these actions. While my goal wasn't to suggest that we can get all our priorities right using this approach, one might be able to shed light on issues such as clean drinking water, avoidance of traffic congestion, and various health and sanitary measures. This rethinking can be achieved if one is willing to consider the currently accepted principle of welfare economics that considers life, health and other quality of life outcomes desirable.

The concept of value of life assumes enormous importance in the context of



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environmental and medical policy. If another major oil spill occurs in the US, causing loss of lives, or a chemical company is found to be illegally dumping toxic wastes in the ground without any remediation and this causes cancer in the neighbouring town, the courts and civil administration have to make a determination of the cost of lives lost. The principle is of importance.

If we ignore the principle due to philosophical or religious beliefs or don't give any importance to lives or health effects of any industrial or natural disaster, we cannot adequately determine the importance of projects that compete for limited funds. After the Bhopal accident

in India, it became known that many cost-cutting measures contributed to the failures that caused the gas leak. However, if Union Carbide (UCC), a US company, had asked: What are the potential costs of failure and how much damage could it cause, even the low average compensation amount (Rs.100,000) would have forced UCC to maintain the safety and maintenance protocols they had in place but never followed.

If human lives are considered "free" and as expendable as clean air and water, we'll soon find ourselves making the wrong decisions in many other areas of public policy. Do we cut down trees in a park, only because there is no use for

them except for recreational purposes? Is a reservoir to be drained and built over because its only use now is for swimming and boating?

Briefly, my point is that, paradoxical as it might sound, only if we put a monetary value to life would we be able to value and save human lives. If power generation has a market value, and human life does not, then soon we'll have power generation taking precedence over projects that positively affect human life and health, protect our ecology, and improve quality of life.

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LEST WE FORGET

A wonderful teacher

MOHAMMAD HAROON-UR-RASHID

I do not find it an easy task to write on Noman Bhai. He had been a person larger than life. The most fascinating thing about him was that, all his life, he had hidden himself behind such a noble shroud of simplicity that even those who knew him from the closest proximity could hardly scale his stature. He had an inherent hypnotising power -- an amazing force of character, a spellbinding aura.

Once you are bound by the spell, you get to know and feel the overwhelming warmth of his nobility. As one cannot measure the height of a mountain while standing on the same mount, one needs to move a distance back to get a realistic view of the vastness of its size. Noman Bhai was the living embodiment of such a great mountain; and those of us who happened to have the privilege of reaching close to him during his lifetime could not measure the vastness of his noble soul.

Today, we are awed by the vacuum his death has created, and we are getting closer to an awareness of the great soul that Professor Noman was.

Noman Bhai dedicated his life for



Professor Noman

others' causes. Never did he bother about self-seeking pursuits. Following the death of his father, Noman Bhai took the responsibility of the fairly large family. He did not let his brothers feel

the pain of bereavement. In the pursuit of this noble cause he found a very able and trusted comrade in Moslema Noman, his wife. She took care of the entire family while Noman Bhai, the

teacher, dedicated his whole self for enriching and enlightening the finer faculties of the students.

He allowed his students unlimited time, in the classroom as well as at his own residence, for deliberations on both curricular and extra-curricular pursuits. To his students he was a trusted friend. Nowadays, when education has become a commodity, Noman Bhai, the great teacher, was never known to have calculated what profits he would derive from giving away the most precious thing on earth; knowledge.

In himself, Noman Bhai was a serene oasis of peace. He was the last person to have lost any ground to nerves on any issue. He remained calm and composed in all circumstances. That's why we always looked at him as the safest of ports where we could seek refuge during stormy weather.

As a brilliant student of literature Prof. Noman used to navigate across the vast waters of world literature with utmost ease. He had command over the classics of English, Bangla, French, Russian and ancient Greek and Roman literature. His literary deliberations, enriched by this sound base of knowl-

edge, attracted the listeners to his responsive mindset. The extraordinary depth of his finer faculties had added a unique blend of creativity in his reviews of world literature. Prof. Noman was like an idol to his students. He was equally loved by his younger colleagues, with whom he used to mix naturally.

I was proud to have the privilege of working with Noman Bhai as one of his younger colleagues on the Dhaka College faculty. It was a memorable phase, when Dhaka College was at the peak of fame as a centre of educational excellence, and Noman Bhai was the central figure of the younger section some celebrated teachers.

Professor Noman became the head of the department of English at Dhaka College following the death of Professor Rafiquddin. For me it was the joy of a lifetime to have the opportunity and honour to work with him.

Dhaka College was a huge chapter in Prof. Noman's life. He worked here for the most part of his teaching career. His tenure there culminated in his becoming the principal of the college. Upon retirement from government service he joined as treasurer of Jahangirnagar

University, where he was Vice-Chancellor for a brief tenure. At the fag end of his life Prof. Noman was honoured by the state with the Ekushey Award in recognition of his outstanding services as a teacher.

Despite having been busy with the heavy responsibilities of the high profile positions he held, Prof. Noman was never known to have run short of his charms of friendship. In fact, he was much above all the worldly positions of pomp and glamour.

Noman Bhai had a very significant hand in building the leadership in this part of the world. Most of those now leading the different sections of our national life are his students. They fondly treasure the memory of Prof. Noman as a glowing symbol of inspiration. Death has failed to separate him from his students and admirers: he remains enshrined in our hearts. He will always be remembered by the nation as a patriarch of education and learning, as a symbol of national pride.

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Tribute to Senator Edward M. Kennedy

AKKU CHOWDHURY

WHEN the people of Bangladesh were being brutalised, raped, killed, maimed and taking refuge in India, Senator Edward Kennedy came to stand by their side. It was a crucial move by this young 37 years old Massachusetts senator to stand up to the Nixon-Kissinger administration, which was directing a policy to resolutely support Pakistan, the prime perpetrator of the genocide being committed in Bangladesh.

As the US Administration turned a blind eye to the atrocities being committed by Pakistan military to suppress the independence movement by Bangladesh Senator Kennedy, along with few other senators and congressmen, spoke out to alert the world and especially the American people. We recollect here diplomats like Archer Blood, who informed the state department about the real situation in Bangladesh and requested to speak out.

Teddy Kennedy didn't stop at just addressing the Senate, he traveled to India to see the plight of the refugees and meet with them so he could document the pain and the suffering of 10 million displaced Benagalees. On his return he gave a report to the judicial committee on refugees calling what he saw "one of the most appalling tides of misery in modern times."

Although the Nixon Administration maintained its stance to continue support and arm the Pakistan military, Kennedy kept his focus to spotlight on the genocide and carry the Americans with him to share in the outrage. Besieged, the U.S. Congress passed a bill later that year to ban arms sales to Pakistan.

On Valentine's day in 1972, Teddy Kennedy along with his wife and nephew arrived in independent Bangladesh and was given a hero's welcome with "Joi Bangla, Joi Kennedy" slogans. He visited the Dhaka University, where the Pakistan army began the carnage on the night of

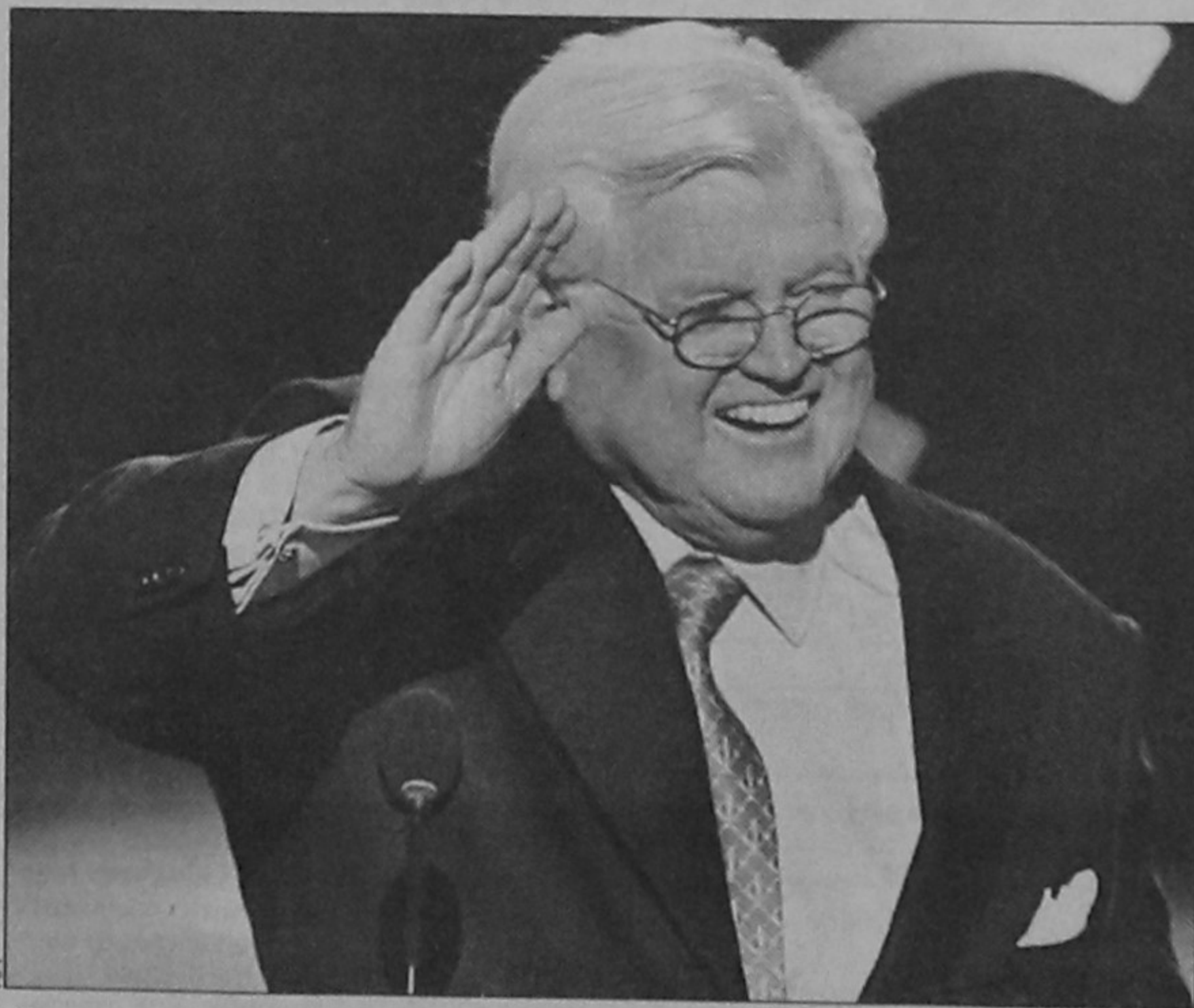
March 25, 1971, and planted a sapling to replace the banyan tree which the Pakistan army had uprooted, thinking that the tree symbolised the Bengalee obsession for freedom and democracy. The banyan tree stands as a testament to a country that can overcome all odds to survive and the man who came forward to assist the people, in whatever little way he could, in its creation.

Edward Kennedy continued to be the champion of the downtrodden, not only in his country but the world over. That's why the nations of the world, from one end to the other, remember the "lion of the Senate" that cared for their cause.

As he once said: "We know the future will outlast all of us, but I believe that all of us will live in the future we make." How prophetic a message, Edward Kennedy will truly always live on.

We recall the eulogy he gave on June 8, 1968, for his slain brother Robert Kennedy at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York city. He said of Bobby:

"My brother need not be idealised, or



Edward M. Kennedy

enlarged in death beyond what he was in life, to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it. Those of us who loved him and who take him to rest today, pray that what he was to us and what he wished for others will some day come to pass for all the world. As he said many times, in many parts of the nation, to those he touched and who sought to touch him: 'Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not.'

Edward Kennedy too was "a good and decent man, who saw things as they are and saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it." As we observe the beginning of the worst war the world ever saw, seventy years ago, let us also vow to try to stop all wrongs and all wars as we pay respect to Senator Edward Kennedy.

Akku Chowdhury is Trustee, Liberation War Museum.