

President Obama and the Nobel Prize

The award is a challenge to America's leader

THE gods, in that certain way in which people invoke mythology, have been kind to Barack Obama ever since he made it known that he wished to be president of the United States. He came from way behind to beat the mighty Clinton machine and seize his party's nomination for the White House, before going on to pummel John McCain into defeat and succeeding George W. Bush. Now he has won this year's Nobel Prize for Peace, which is clearly a testament to the sheer sense of excitement and idealism he has brought to politics not only in his country but also across the world in the months since he was inaugurated as America's new leader. He has been travelling to myriad places, to inform people that a new sense of purpose is there, symbolized by his leadership. He has been doing all he can to convince sceptics everywhere that the America he leads intends to be less arrogant and more responsive to global opinion.

Which is why it is quite proper to think that President Obama has richly deserved the Nobel. His efforts to build a new construct of diplomacy with Russia; his attempts to prod Palestinians and Israelis into new negotiations for peace; his forceful oratory outlining the programmes he has of engaging with the Muslim world (note his address in Cairo), et cetera, have in these past nine months gone a long way towards creating a new image abroad for his country. The antipathy that people everywhere felt towards the Bush-Cheney administration has softly and steadily given way to a better understanding of Washington because Mr. Obama has sought to present Washington in new and refreshing light before the world. The Nobel Committee has noted what it calls his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples through giving multilateralism a central position in the scheme of things. One thinks here of the positive approach the Obama administration has taken over global climate issues, in stark contrast to the obduracy with which his predecessor handled them. The Nobel is thus a proper celebration of new leadership and new idealism in America.

And yet the prize will be seen as a challenge for President Obama. That is because so far he has not made much headway, in practical terms, with his vision of a newer and better world. The Middle East remains intractable. Iraq still cannot do without America's military presence and Afghanistan shows no sign of being able to stand up for itself. North Korea has defied Obama while Iran remains adamant about the nuclear programme it means to pursue. Guantanamo and, with that, terrorism remain big question marks for the president. It is on how Mr. Obama deals with these issues that the justifiability of the Nobel Peace Prize will be measured.

For now, though, the man who has promised change deserves our congratulations. We give them to him freely.

Anti-adulteration drive

Tough measures needed

THE drive against adulteration and sale of substandard foods appears to have lost its momentum as not much has been done in the last couple of years. The result is that the unscrupulous elements thriving on consumers' miseries are back in business.

So, it is good news that a team of the BSTI officials and the police visited some shops and food outlets in the city on Tuesday and fined eight of them for selling substandard and stale foods in violation of BSTI rules.

The problem of adulteration and production and marketing of all kinds of low quality foodstuff is a major area of concern today as it has a direct bearing on public health. Things are going awfully wrong for the consumers whose right to have safe food has never received due attention.

The BSTI officials have said that such crackdown on the dishonest producers and sellers will no longer be a seasonal affair only. The point is highly relevant since adulteration and production of substandard foods is not a problem that can be resolved through making occasional forays on shops and restaurants. Examples will definitely show that very few food items are now safe enough to consume. Vegetables are extremely unsafe as an overdose of pesticides is often used by the producers and toxic preservatives finally make them unfit for human consumption. Fish preserved with formalin are equally harmful and so are the fruits that look overly fresh and juicy. So much for the food items that were never on the adulteration list in the past. Now one can easily imagine what is happening in restaurants where hygiene rules do not really mean much and supervision is virtually non-existent.

Doctors and health experts have been telling us for a pretty long time that we are exposed to grave health hazards as the food producers and sellers are marketing anything and everything for human consumption. The response to all these warnings has so far been very inadequate. Obviously, the rich owners of food outlets are seldom unsettled when they are made to pay a nominal amount imposed as fine. The archaic laws need to be revised in order to keep the situation under control. Without question, adulteration, which amounts to slow poisoning, has to be treated as a culpable crime.

We believe the anti-adulteration drive will be reinforced with the objective of reining in the traders and businessmen who pose a grave threat to public health.

Rape is inevitable if not punished

There are some people who even blame the victim, not the rapist, for the offence. Many victims commit suicide out of shame after being raped. If the government is really serious about curbing this kind of violence against women and girls, the punishment for such crimes must be harsh, leaving any kind of consideration aside.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

WE will not mind if Oscar-winning filmmaker Roman Polanski is tried per the same law that applies to anyone who commits such a crime, because letting this kind of crime go unpunished is not only a miscarriage of justice but also a slap to humanity. Polanski, 76, who drugged and raped a 13-year-old girl in California in 1977, was arrested on September 26, 2009 on a U.S. warrant by authorities in Switzerland.

Rape or sexual torture is not just a heinous criminal act but a morally despicable one too. Sexual abuse is a serious world problem and a crime against the community, not only against the victim herself. Rapes happen across the social strata in Bangladesh. They are never reported unless the news becomes public. In recent times, almost every newspaper in Bangladesh covered a series of rapes across the country.

A teenage girl was kidnapped by a gang of young men at Uttar Goalia village under Thakurgaon district, on September 26, 2009. A schoolgirl of class 3 was raped at Ramanandapur village in Pabna Sadar upazila on Friday, October 2, while rapists didn't spare a ten-year old schoolgirl's life after fulfilling their heinous act at Nayapara village in Dhobaura upazila, Mymensingh on Thursday, October 1. A leader of the student wing of the present ruling government was one step ahead as his raping video hit the market. Ahsan Kabir Maman,

a leader of Pirojpur district unit Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) lured a class 10 student to a love trap, raped her, recorded it in mobile, and then marketed it.

The above reports, in addition, include a gang rape conducted by a group of BCL activists. They kidnapped a school girl of class 7 of Pakhimara in Kalapara upazila, Patuakhali, on September 25, and raped her until at around 2:00 am. This report, however, ended with more rotten news. The group was able to get rid of this allegation with a fine of Tk. 10,000 each and managed to ensure their escape by local Awami League leaders. They even forced the victim's family to rebut the rape report in a press conference organised by them. The victim's family was also forced to file a defamation case against the local reporters who focused on the rape news.

The victim or victim's family go into hiding every time that police or law enforcement agencies remain inactive against the rapists, amidst reprisal from the perpetrators, when instead, the rapists should be punished and not let off. But very often, we find that the legal system in Bangladesh apparently is lenient with rapist, paedophiles, and exhibitionists -- the sex offenders who put fear into the public and pose a threat to residents in their neighbourhoods and communities.

It is only the rape victim who has no chance of justice. In a cruel way, this often forces the rape victim to accept rape as an unfortunate occasional occurrence within

all families, and she herself may acquiesce in hushing up another rape tomorrow.

The law enforcement agencies, even when they get to know of a rape, or even when a rape victim approaches them, almost always discourage the family from filing a complaint. Often they are threatened, if the alleged rapist is someone in a powerful position or a political activist. At other times, the police remind the victim's family of the social repercussions and attention (and permanent social humiliation, no marriages for anyone else in the family etc. etc.) and the victim returns home to wash away all evidence of the crime.

Rape is a devastating crime. Some women are badly injured. Some become pregnant. Some contract HIV. But the emotional trauma can be worse than any physical injury. Women who are raped have nightmares, panic attacks, waves of self-doubt, and/or an overwhelming sense of distrust. The lives of women who are raped are forever changed. Some say they will never be the same, and that it's like dying.

683,000 forcible rapes occur every year in the world, which equals 56,916 per month, 1,871 per day, 78 per hour, and 1.3 per minute. According to the Dhaka-based human rights monitoring group Odhikar, a total of 44 women and girls were raped between August 1 and 31 in the country. Among them, 16 were women and 17 were children, aged below sixteen. Out of 16 women, 3 were reportedly killed after rape, 5 were victims of gang-rape, while out of the 17 girls, 2 were reportedly killed after rape, and 5 were victims of gang-rape. In May, 33 women and girls fell victim to rape. From January to March 2009, 73 women and children were the victims of rape or attempted rape.

In 1993, the United Nations passed a resolution placing rape, for the first time, within the framework of war crimes. Furthermore, the U.N. General Assembly established that rape, under certain circumstances, could also constitute genocide. The International War Crimes

Tribunal in The Hague reinforced this with a ruling in 2001, stating that rape of civilians is a crime against humanity. Rape is mentioned only once in Bangladesh's International Crimes (Tribunals) Act of 1973, and is identified only as a crime against humanity. It has been alleged that an estimated 200,000 women were raped during the Bangladesh Liberation War by the Pakistani army.

The law in Bangladesh prohibits rape and physical abuse. The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act of 2000 ensures stringent punishment, up to death, for rape-related crimes. Women leaders, human rights activists, lawyers and civil society members have no problem with the law. But given the cultural pressures, the sense of shame, the fear and the slow, bull-dog pace of justice in the country, and direct influence by political leaders, many rape incidents go unreported for various reasons. A rape victim becomes unwarranted in society if the incident is made public. There are some people who even blame the victim, not the rapist, for the offence. Many victims commit suicide out of shame after being raped.

Sexual violence is impacting the next generation. Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of democracy, development, and peace in any country. Despite having women politicians and women in leadership positions in the country, violence against women, unfortunately, continues to be part of daily life.

If the government is really serious about curbing this kind of violence against women and girls, the punishment for such crimes must be harsh, leaving any kind of consideration aside. If a rapist gets away scot-free, or gets away with minor punishment, then that means rape is a viable sexual strategy for a large number of men. Rape is inevitable if we don't punish it.

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The efforts towards Copenhagen must succeed

Limiting the temperature rise to two degrees celsius is an accepted goal but there is still no consensus on how to get there. The industrialized nations have also not agreed on midterm targets. They have made pledges of roughly half the target set by the IPCC, a 25 per cent to 40 per cent reduction from 1990 levels by 2020.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE United Nations Climate Conference being convened in Copenhagen in December is at times described as 'a last chance to avert catastrophe on a global scale'. That is now viewed as the less extreme end of the international debate. A lot rides on the success of the summit, but analysts and environmentalists feel that despite some movement forward during the UNGA in New York, the prospects of a deal are not as forthcoming as was expected.

The Copenhagen conference is supposed to negotiate a replacement to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the landmark deal that first bound nations to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The importance of the current effort lies in the fact that its provisions start expiring in 2012. There is also general scientific consensus that Kyoto's successor should aim at reducing carbon emissions so that average temperatures do not rise by more than two degrees celsius. It is felt that higher rates of increase would risk ecological changes of serious proportions. In practical terms, such an equation would mean binding targets so that 'the rate of emissions stops growing immediately and starts falling by 2015'. Scientists associated with the environment and climate change within the United Nations framework believe that by 2050 such cuts should reach 80%.

We all know that various obstacles still exist within the negotiations paradigm.

However, the main one appears to be the global fault line between developed and developing worlds. Countries with unfulfilled industrial potential -- mainly China and India -- have not yet agreed to compromise in concrete numbers pertaining to eco-austerity. One can understand their dilemma. Both have announced major commitments to renewable energy and are looking at the equation from the perspective of their strategic planning. They hold the already industrialised countries responsible for the legacy of carbon in the atmosphere. On the other hand, the industrialised countries are reluctant to bind themselves to targets that do not restrain countries they see as competitors.

The initiative and discussions that have taken place within the United Nations General Assembly (with Bangladesh being an active participant under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina) have made it clear that the theoretical framework for a compromise is broadly in place. This format expects the developed world to accept its responsibility for old pollution and make amends by subsidising low-carbon energy in the developing world. In exchange for transfer of green technology from rich to poor, the developing world will also consider implementing significant emissions targets.

It is true that translating such a framework into a treaty will be hard. However, I am optimistic that with sufficient political will, the wrinkles can be ironed out. We have already seen how difficulties can be overcome. This has been exemplified

through the response of the global leaders to the financial crisis. This is proof that fear of a trans-border crisis can galvanise co-ordinated and collective action.

One could describe the United Nations' current efforts as a form of diplomatic shock therapy for world leaders. The UN Secretary General is trying to inject badly needed urgency into the negotiations, presently adrift. It is clear that the world leaders have to be converted into committed advocates of radical action. Without this, it will be difficult to reach a credible and enforceable agreement. We have already had the World Water Forum in Istanbul in May, the World Water Week in Stockholm in August and the meeting in Geneva in September. The UNGA session is being followed by the G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh and another important summit in Stockholm in October. All these conferences have and are giving special attention to the different aspects of climate variability ahead of the digital counter, ticking off the hours to the Copenhagen summit.

The world leadership has to understand that the impacts of climate change will be inequitable and will particularly affect harshly some of the poorest in the world. One can only hope that this spurt of interaction between the environmentalist activists, chief executives of corporations and the political leadership will facilitate in the identification of least common denominators, the taking of necessary action and the leadership being imbued with a new sense of common purpose.

Barrack Obama has indicated America's commitment. China's President Hu Jintao has also assured reduction of gas emissions by a 'notable margin'. One hopes that this will be followed up with more concrete details ahead of the Copenhagen meeting. This will help boost negotiations.

On a parallel track we also need to agree on how we are going to close the 'finance gap' and the failure of industrialized states to come up with a package on how to compensate poor countries (like Bangladesh)

that are expected to suffer the most devastating consequences. Negotiators on more than one occasion have pointed out that major industrialised states have yet to set clear figures on how much they are willing to commit, or how they will provide the funding. This has resulted in climate change experts planning a fallback position should the December Copenhagen summit fail to produce a strong enough agreement. It is good that Plan-B is being thought of, but that should not be seen as an alternative.

Right now, the draft agreement for Copenhagen runs to more than 200 pages -- including what negotiators estimate are a couple of thousand brackets denoting points of differences. Negotiators are also anxious about the unwieldy nature of the document and some of the still outstanding issues. Limiting the temperature rise to two degrees celsius is an accepted goal but there is still no consensus on how to get there. The industrialized nations have also not agreed on midterm targets. They have made pledges of roughly half the target set by the IPCC, a 25 per cent to 40 per cent reduction from 1990 levels by 2020.

Developing countries on the other hand have agreed on the need to mitigate their emissions, but have rejected any mandatory limit with regard to agriculture. Unfortunately, the contentious aspects within the debate and differences within the poorer nations and island states might eventually affect the complex issue of aid for the poorest countries.

Finally, between now and Copenhagen, we also need to agree on what institutions would verify how targets are being met and which will supervise the finances.

There are unresolved issues. However I tend to agree with President Obama's comment that we must all take responsibility and view this as an effort in global problem solving rather than as global negotiation.

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Street daughter: Vulnerability at its peak

The protagonists project the voices of daughters, in general. The voices of street daughters do not find any outlet for manifestation.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

SEPTEMBER 30 was earmarked for the observance of Daughter Day and October 2 had been observed as Street Child Day. On these days, human rights activists and women groups raise slogans and stage protest demonstrations against all forms of violence against daughters. Despite the observance of a special day or week for community sensitization, street girls or daughters continue to suffer in a street environment unfriendly to them. Torture, harsh treatment and sexual abuse continue to batter and bruise their lives.

Street daughters are likely to be grossly neglected, roaming around in different groups as collectors of waste dumped in city dustbins, fallen tree leaves, and broken pieces of bricks or stones. Extremely poor daughters in the countryside collect cowdung, dry leaves and firewood.

Reliable estimates of the magnitude of their crisis are scanty. Untold stories of their extremely bitter taste of life in the wake of

escalating tension and trepidation, illustrated with cases of abandonment, rape, trafficking to brothels, persecution and even beaten to death, or almost death, are plenty. They are the product of a worsening poverty situation in the countryside, dislocation due to forced eviction and natural calamity and rural-urban migration. Being detached from their original homes, they are exposed to severe abuse in cruel street situations. Many among these poor daughters who have migrated to metropolitan areas are provoked by some imposters to find the 'pot of gold' in Dhaka and Chittagong.

At the global-national level, there are human rights-focused activities bolstered by international conventions, declarations, constitutional provisions, and laws of land to protect the rights of these young daughters. There is a gap in globally and nationally defined institutional arrangements for protecting street girls against violence as these street daughters are lost in the fringe of a city's lanes and by-lanes. They are, thus, off the radar screen as missing links.

Advocacy for improving the street situation to give the girl maverick a sense of life is distressingly missing. The role of the feminine movement is being redeemed through persuasion, discussion, campaigning communication, and networking. The protagonists of such a movement project the voices of these daughters, in general. The voices of street daughters do not find any outlet for manifestation.

The plight of these street daughters beggars description. Even then, street daughters are over sighted as the issue of child or child labour policy. Mandates expressed in periodic conferences on children hardly take note of street daughters. They are an out-of-reach vulnerable group suffering recurring odds of urban life.

According to a sample survey conducted by an action researcher, street daughters with no families are exposed to all sorts of trouble, like molestations, police tortures, arrests, accidents and 'declarations of love' by street mastans. Love is a weapon used effectively by street mastans to rape street daughters. Resistance from a raped girl is too low even if the so-called lover refuses to marry her. This is because of the manipulative skill of these hoodlums in a seemingly masstani culture that grips the street corners.

The fear of arrest, mixed with intimidat-

ion, is endemic. Once a street daughter is arrested, the brokers try later on to release her in exchange for sexual gratification. This intercession by brokers is a common urban phenomenon.

The sexually abused girls suffer from health complications like abdominal pain, headache, drowsiness, and distaste for food. Some among the raped girls become pregnant, consequently 'losing a baby through induced abortion'. In some cases of abuse, once a girl is known to be pregnant, she is branded as spoilt (nasta in local usage). She is ostracized as well as traumatized.

The trauma level of street girls who might have lost their virginity is very high. They show signs of a behavioral disorder that includes symptoms like traumatic neurosis, anxiety, depression, phobia, abnormality and agitation. Such a behavioral disorder has deleterious effects on her growth. Many a maverick, once abandoned, have to take recourse to mobile prostitution near cinema halls, bus terminals, parks and other public places. They are mostly drug addicts carrying the AIDS virus or a sexually transmitted disease (STD).

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