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## The tragedy of the majority: Sajek once more

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Tazreena Sajjad

ON Friday, December 11, 2009, the mosque in the village of Yasuf in the West Bank was vandalised before dawn. The vandals burned prayer carpets and a bookstand with Islamic holy texts, and left graffiti on the floor reading: "Price tag -- greetings from Effi." The graffiti was accompanied by the more direct threat, "we will burn all of you."

Settler attacks -- arson on agricultural fields, chopping down olive trees, poisoning water wells, killing livestock and assaulting villagers living near settlements -- have become a way of life for Palestinians all over the West Bank. Israeli authorities are well-reputed for turning a blind eye to such incidents. When ordered to provide daily military escorts for children from various towns and villages in the southern West Bank, the Israeli army has faced criticisms of being a source of hostility towards the children themselves, as many of the soldiers are sympathetic towards the settlers.

If any account of the violence perpetrated against Palestinians brings a tear to your eye, makes you shake your head in disbelief at the brutality of settlement wrath, the indifference (if not antipathy) of the authorities towards Palestinians, you certainly can lay a claim to being on the side of the just, the "true" victims of a longstanding military and settler occupation.

Yet, when you have shed your tears and expressed your indignation at the continuing systematic oppression of Palestine, expressed

moral outrage at the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, when you have celebrated February 21 as a day of national pride and cultural heritage, do you think you could spare a thought for the people of Sajek?

Could you for a moment feel not just a surge of empathy but a twinge of conscience, before being swamped by compassion fatigue?

Substitute the names and location of the first two paragraphs, and a few details, and you will see that while your nation prepared to herald the anniversary of the moral victory of the Bangla language over the tyranny of the Pakistani regime, a handful of settlers launched yet another attack on the Jumma people in Sajek.

On the night of February 19, arson attacks were carried out on 200 Pahari homes in the Baghahat area of Sajek union under Baghaichari upazila in Rangamati district in the following villages and their adjoining areas -- Gangaram Mukh, Guchchhagram, Hazachhara, Jaralchhari, Dane Baipachhara, Bame Baipachhara, Simanachhara, Chhurung Nala and Gulakmachhara. As I write this, there have been two confirmed deaths, although the number may be much higher, and efforts might already be underway to destroy evidence by burning the dead bodies.

This is not the first time that atrocities have been committed against the Pahari people. For example, on April 20, 2008, a group of settlers attacked several indigenous villages, injuring people and burning down more than 70 houses. The official military response was "communal

harmony," that the Bangladesh military exists in the Hill Tracts between the Bengalis and the Pahari people and that "external terrorists" threatened the peaceful status quo. In saying so, it ignored a litany of tragedy that mars Bengali-Pahari relations and the atrocities committed by Bengali settlers -- the Logang cluster village massacre in Khagrachhari on April 10, 1992; Naniarchar Bazar massacre in Rangamati on November 17, 1993; the Malya massacre in Langadu upazilla in 1992 and communal riots such as the Bhuacchhari incident, that took place between April and May 2003.

As the few reports from Sajek manage to circuitously enter the news waves, the picture that emerges is yet of another tragedy -- of frightened communities, dead bodies, burning homes, and a desperate search for safety; and even in a place of worship, desecrated by the attacks, there is no place to feel secure. There is anger too -- an immediate knee-jerk human response to the brutality witnessed, an anger that is and will manifest itself through local youths banding together to physically express their anger and frustration, targeting Bengali settlers and bringing the army back into the mix, using more force to quell an already unsettled community.

And so, while the government continues to ignore the deep-rooted causes of this cycle of violence and unleash the military against a largely civilian population, a seething community will continue to experience a deepening of the fault lines of "us" and "them" and the politics of settlement and that of dispossession.

Sajek is not an isolated incident of a disgruntled Pahari population clashing with the settlement population because of the struggle for access to land and resources. It is a culmination of the unresolved questions of citizenship and citizenry that Bangladesh has not confronted with humility and sincere engagement.

It is not only about the denial of the constitutional rights of the indigenous populations that reside within the physical boundaries of Bangladesh, but the unfulfilled commitments made 12 years, 2 months and 3 weeks ago in the Peace Accords signed between the Government of Bangladesh and the Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS).

It is about the dire need, right here, right now, to adroitly address the simmering violence and ethnic tensions in Sajek and in other communities where the Bengali muscle power is supplemented by the military might of the national army. This tension will not be vanquished by a few troop withdrawals, or as some political groups might argue, with massive military build-up, which will only pave the way for a further escalation of conflict. The military has never been, and never will be, a permanent solution to any political crisis.

The story of Sajek is a story of illegal occupation, forced dispossession, of indiscriminate use of violence, intimidation, and disproportionate use of force. It is about using a military, which has an established international reputation in peace-keeping and protecting civilians, to inspire fear and distrust in a minority population.

Portraying both sides as equal antagonists in the current conflict serves to distort the realities of this tragedy. And the facts on the ground are that, this time, the Bengalis are the aggressors.

The tragedy of the majority is that it can choose to be silent. The greater tragedy is that the silence can alter the course of history. This time, we, the Bengalis, are the majority, and the onus is on us to speak up and demand that the voices of Sajek be heard.

This time, we should break the silence, recognising that the moral authority of victimhood is not ours to claim.

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## Ascertaining unemployment rate

In view of what has been stated above, it is high time to ascertain the correct rate of unemployment in the country, and it must be free from political bias in the greater national interest.



M. Abdul Latif Mondal

IN the prime minister's question-answer session on February 17, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina disclosed in the House her government's plan to bring down unemployment rate to 15 percent from the existing 40 percent by the year 2021. She listed the programs that her government had already undertaken for employment generation to remove the curse of unemployment. These include, inter alia, imparting technical training to unemployed youths through 38 technical training centres, building 30 more technical training centres in

those districts with no such centres, and upgrading syllabus of 23 courses run by the manpower, employment and training bureau to international standards, keeping in mind the demands of international recruiters.

Unemployment means involuntary idleness due to lack of work. Unemployed means persons belonging to the labour force seeking but not doing any work during a specified period.

In the latest Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2005-06 (published in April, 2008) of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the country's labour force (15 years + population) stood at 84.6 million. In the LFS of 2002-03, it stood at 80.8 million. The

population below the age of 15 years falls into the category of child population and cannot, as per law, be treated as labour force. Even if we stick to the 2005-06 LFS figure of 84.6 million, after four-plus years the number of the unemployed calculated at 40 percent of the labour force stands at about 34 million in the country.

High rate of unemployment, particularly of the educated youths, poses serious socio-economic problems. Proliferation of schools and colleges, particularly in the rural areas, and various incentives given to the students, in particular to the female students at secondary and higher secondary levels, have helped enroll a good number of students from the lower strata of the society. But most of these students cannot go for higher education after passing the HSC/equivalent level primarily due to two reasons: one, financial hardship of their guardians, and two, guardians' insistence on seeking a job.

A jobless educated youth, particularly a male, becomes a burden for his family. He gets little respect in his family or in the society. This forces him to resort to criminal activities such as hijacking, working as a trafficker of dangerous drugs, working as a musclemans of a corrupt politician, or joining a group of militants.

The vast pool of unemployed youths sometimes fall prey to recruiting agencies for overseas employment, which offer them nonexistent jobs or conditions that leave them stranded upon arrival in the receiving countries. This leads to suffering in the form of imprisonment, forced labour, etc.

The point that comes to the fore is ascertaining the rate of unemployment in the country. According to the PM's statement, it is 40 percent at the moment. It is not known which ministry provided information to the PM. If it was labour and manpower ministry, then what was its source of information? On the other hand, the LFS 2005-06 estimated the rate of unemployment of labour force at 4.3 percent which was

also the same in the LFS of 2002-03 (ref. page 68 of LFS 2005-06).

Why this big gap? The LFS 2005-06 says that while conducting survey, it followed ILO definition which considers any person, who did not work for pay or profit for even an hour in the preceding week (of survey), as unemployed. Many people doubt the correctness of our survey along the ILO line.

Secondly, according to the LFS 2005-06, the annual labour force growth rate for the period 2000-2003 to 2005-06 stood at 2.21 percent, which is higher than the annual population growth rate. Have we been able to increase job opportunities at the above growth rate of labour force?

Thirdly, when the rate of unemployment in the United States is hovering around 10 percent (9.7 percent in January, 2010), how can our unemployment rate be only 4.3 percent?

The importance of timely and reliable information can hardly be over-emphasised. The basis for this information is nationally produced statistics. Statistics provide information, or the evidence needed for the government's daily administration and policy analyses; policy makers' planning, businesses' decisions, and citizens' possibility of holding the government accountable. While reliable and available statistics can foster awareness and knowledge of the country's social, demographic, economic and environmental conditions, poor statistics can lead to insufficient knowledge of the social, demographic, economic and environmental conditions and impede successful planning, policy decisions and accountability.

In view of what has been stated above, it is high time to ascertain the correct rate of unemployment in the country, and it must be free from political bias in the greater national interest.

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## How India lost the plot in talks

She left the last word to Salman Bashir. Her hurry to brief the media was inexplicable; it was Bashir who had to go take a flight out of Delhi. She could have waited. We lost the plot both before and after the talks.

M.J. AKBAR

DELHI lost its own plot one day before foreign secretaries Nirupama Rao and Salman Bashir sat down at Hyderabad House to reopen the dialogue between India and Pakistan.

Salman Bashir came to Delhi for two sets of talks, not one. The Indian government was the second half of his agenda. The first, and from his perspective the more important, part was the resumption of dialogue between Islamabad and secessionist elements in Jammu and Kashmir, Hurriyat leaders and the more extreme Syed Ali Shah Geelani.

Bashir did not want to talk to Omar or Farooq Abdullah, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, Mehbooba Mufti or Ghulam Nabi Azad, who represent parties that won a substantial number of seats in the assembly. He wanted to hear what Geelani said, that there was a storm brewing in the valley. Bashir reassured Geelani that Pakistan had not abandoned its dream of altering the map of India.

These pre-arranged meetings were held with the consent of the Indian government. If the Indian government had wanted to prevent them, Hurriyat leaders and Geelani would not have been able to catch the flight from Srinagar to Delhi. Precedence -- the fact that we have enabled such meetings before -- is not the point.

India stopped the ongoing dialogue under unusual circumstances, after the terrorist invasion of Mumbai. Delhi offered a resumption of talks, but with one condition, that they would focus on terrorism; and issues like Kashmir (part of the composite dialogue) would be taken up only after Pakistan had provided satisfaction that it had acted against known terrorists and instigators of Mumbai, like Hafiz Saeed.

If that was going to be our focus, if that was the agenda we had set, why did we permit the meetings between Pakistan and Hurriyat-Geelani? We could have explained that Pakistan could talk to the Kashmiri leaders on Indian soil the next time around, if there was a next time; on February 25, it would only be about terrorism.

When we did not, Pakistan inferred that it was business as usual, and that our position on terrorism was rhetoric meant for domestic consumption. Pakistan voiced such an inference when Salman Bashir briefed the media, saying that Kashmir had been discussed "extensively" and suggesting that India had returned to the negotiating table because of international pressure.

It was, he implied with that little smile on either corner of his mouth, a diplomatic triumph for Pakistan.

Perhaps, the time has come for India to demand reciprocal rights. It would be interesting if Nirupama Rao insists,



The time for silence has passed.

during her next visit to Islamabad (she has received an invitation), upon meeting insurgents from Balochistan -- assuming that they are either alive or outside jail.

Let us be clear about one reality: Salman Bashir could have returned without undue damage to his professional health, if talks with Rao had been sabotaged before they started, but he might have had to take a flight to some other country if he had returned without meeting Hurriyat and Geelani. Kashmir is the heart and head of Pakistan's policy towards India.

There is insufficient recognition, certainly among Indians and possibly within the Indian government, of the fact that Pakistan's policy has hardened after the Mumbai terrorist onslaught, rather than softened. Pervez Musharraf's "close-to-a-solution" is now denied as mere waffle, since nothing was put in writing.

Mumbai is not cause for mea culpa, but reason for accusation: India deserves what it got because it holds Kashmir "illegally." In such a narrative, Hafiz Saeed becomes the daring maverick who brought Kashmir back to the centre stage as the "core" issue (a term Salman Bashir used repeatedly, as was his brief).

India and Pakistan might agree, therefore, that terrorism is an evil, but they have totally divergent definitions of who constitutes a terrorist. Salman Bashir can agree on terrorism without blinking an eyelid, and moan about thousands dead in his own country -- but they died from Taliban bullets and bombs, not from a Hafiz Saeed gun. India's terrorist is Pakistan's freedom fighter.

As Bashir coolly explained in Delhi, Hafiz Saeed was within his democratic rights when, at his Lahore rally, he told followers armed with Kalashnikovs that one Mumbai was not enough. The Pakistan army would have opened artillery fire if the Taliban had dared to hold a similar public meeting in Peshawar.

Rao, who was firm enough during the talks, made one serious mistake. She forgot a basic law of Indo-Pak diplomacy. She left the last word to Salman Bashir. Her hurry to brief the media was inexplicable; it was Bashir who had to go take a flight out of Delhi. She could have waited. We lost the plot both before and after the talks.

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