

Elevating women's position

Emphasis on law by itself cannot deliver, implementation key

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has announced her government's resolve on the occasion of the 100th International Women's Day to repeal all laws discriminatory to women and make a duly updated National Women Development Policy work to change the women's lot in a radical way. It is worthwhile to note that a national women's development policy was formulated by an Awami League government itself during 1996-2001 which was thereafter tampered with by the BNP-Jamaat alliance government that followed. Thus, if we took one step forward we were soon to go two steps backwards.

In other words, mere presence of a policy document or a law (there were tough anti-dowry and anti-acid throwing measures aplenty) has hardly ever been anything more than a declaration of intent; for, it fell short of implementation and therefore, not a sufficient guarantee for establishment of all the rights for women that we set about achieving since the birth of the country, particularly since the inception of the country's constitution. We have learned the hard way that it is easier said than done.

First of all, a robust political will backed by an environment congenial to a paradigm shift in the women's overall situation in the household, family, society, workplace and policy and decision making fields will have to be brought to bear on the pressing agenda for women's advancement. Secondly, the laws that exist against different forms of violence against and exploitation of women which have been stringent in words but weak in application will have to be rewritten to be made fail-safe. In a word, we have to have an adequate legal framework on protection, preservation and full exercise of women's rights at par with those enjoyed in other countries of comparable backgrounds which have hit the high road to success in terms of gender balance and equality.

Another most important component of change relates to institutional preparations which seem to be lacking in vital areas such as, for example, in the local body institutions where women have been given greater representation but not an equal role. This instance can be multiplied, the list can be almost endless where women's policy and decision making roles are at worst conspicuous by absence or at best circumscribed by subtle devices.

So long as the mindset does not change in the still male-dominant society, the women's lot cannot be refashioned in a truly qualitative way of which the whole society can be legitimately proud and a full beneficiary.

Land grab in Cox's Bazar

Bring these criminals before the law

DESPITE all the concerns that have been raised in the recent past about the many instances of illegal land grabbing across the country, the menace appears to have gone on. The impunity with which such activities are resorted to by individuals as well as groups has left the nation amazed at the audacity with which they have indulged in such misdeeds. The bigger concern is the failure of the authorities to put an end to such acts effectively through deterrent punishment being meted out to them. And it is because of such a failure that certain sections of people have continued to grab land that belongs to either the government or individuals.

The latest that we have here is news of a fresh attempt to seize land illegally in Cox's Bazar. This time it is under the leadership of a woman that some people quickly put up two corrugated tin-shed houses in a hill area at Kolatoli of Cox's Bazar under the banner of 'Office of Bangladesh Freedom Fighters' Rehabilitation Society'. It is very clear that the person in question had no authorization to put up the two structures and yet the surprising bit here is her defence that the land had earlier been proposed as a site during the period of the past elected government for the office she was acting on behalf of. More tellingly, when a group of Muktiyoddha Sangsad officials asked her to desist from occupying the land in the name of the freedom fighters, she paid no heed and went on with her work. That is perhaps a powerful hint of the clout people like her have and the links they may have with unsavoury quarters. The good news about the episode in Cox's Bazar is that eventually the Forest Department was able to demolish the illegal constructions. That ought to be a satisfying end to the drama, but it should not be for the simple reason that in and around Cox's Bazar similar instances of land grab have been going on without any action being taken against those involved. In places like Kolatoli and Lalpara, no fewer than 1,000 houses have been constructed on 700 acres of land that are rightfully the property of the Forest Department. There are at least 1,00,000 people who happen to be residing in these houses.

All of these are incidents that increase citizens' worries to a huge extent. We at this newspaper have consistently argued, along with other socially conscious sections of society, that every illegal or predatory act on the part of anyone must be handled with a resolute hand. Unless firmness of action and purpose is in demonstration, the elements behind such criminal acts will go on having a field day. Let the authorities set an example, through bringing the Cox's Bazar land grabbers to justice. It is not enough to free the land of these people. They must also be penalized for their criminal acts.

That passport is his lasting legacy

You travel abroad, holding that green Bangladesh passport in your hand. If you wish to deny the heritage of the Big Man that was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, look at that passport. It is the legacy he has left you with. Deny it if you can.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HERE is quite something to be said about those Bengalis who somehow cannot rest easy with the place of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in history. Two decades ago, Syed Najmuddin Hashim enlightened yours truly with remarkable tales of some Bengali civil service officers trapped in Pakistan in the aftermath of Bangladesh's battlefield triumph in late 1971.

Dismissed from service by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and placed in discrete camps all over Pakistan, these Bengali officers spewed venom against Bangabandhu and even made the dire prediction that his new country would soon return to the fold of Pakistan. These men had, after all, lost their cushy jobs and did not quite relish the prospect of working for a country that had till recently been a mere province of the state that now was disowning them. And yet the irony is that these very men came home to Bangladesh and rose to high positions. They proved relentless, though, in their antipathy towards Bangabandhu.

That only reminds you of the Bengali officer in Pakistan's foreign service stationed at the Pakistan mission in Delhi in 1971. On his annual leave he did not go to "East Pakistan" but travelled to West Pakistan, where he quarrelled with other Bengalis and rudely described the Bengali liberation struggle as a conspiracy against Pakistan. You only have to read the late Khalilur Rahman's book to go into the details.

There is then the tale of the brother of a leading Bangladeshi intellectual. An officer in the Pakistan army, he agreed with his Pakistani friends that Bangabandhu was destroying the Muslim country. When he first received news that his sibling had been kidnapped and killed in Bangladesh on the eve of its liberation, he quickly blamed the Mukti Bahini for the tragedy. He lapsed into stupefied silence when it swiftly became known that it was the al-Badr, the collabo-

rators who had served as the quislings of the army he was serving, that had murdered his sibling.

In independent Bangladesh, we have had precious little dearth of Bangabandhu baiters. A retired military officer once stranded in Pakistan and who rose to a high perch in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (before subsequently being sidelined as a reformist in caretaker times) informed a relative without shame at a point that he did not regard Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Bangabandhu. It did not occur to him that the peaks he had climbed after 1971 all had to do with the politics Bangabandhu had pursued in his career. This man retired as a general in the Bangladesh army. Had Pakistan survived in these parts, he would have retired as a lieutenant colonel. And those men Hashim spoke about would, minus Bangladesh, have gone into superannuation as section officers.

No, we are not surprised that the woman who so scandalously tried to humiliate the Father of the Nation in the Jatiyo Sangsad last week came out so murderously vehement in her denunciation of the great man. Her sense of history is non-existent; her understanding of politics has not gone beyond an expression of expletives. But why blame her for her shallowness when the more despicable reality is one of her party's conscious efforts to undercut Bangabandhu at every turning it has taken?

The Zia regime made sure that Bangabandhu was airbrushed out of history. In the Ershad period, more humiliation was piled on Bangabandhu, on all of us, when the killers of the nation's founder were allowed the privilege of forming a political party and taking part in elections. The fact that the process of the trial of Bangabandhu's assassins was halted soon after the BNP-Jamaat alliance found itself in power in 2001 was a fresh demonstration of the animosity with which the "Bangladeshi nationalists" and the old defenders of Pakistan looked upon Bangabandhu.

Go beyond these political spaces. There



Symbol of our sovereignty.

are journalists in Bangladesh who do all they can to strike at Bangabandhu's stature. Erstwhile pro-Peking elements (and you have journalists among them too) will give you long dialectical arguments on how Bangabandhu and the Awami League "commandeered" the liberation struggle just when these leftists were about to bring freedom to our people. The fact is that leftists like Abdul Haq were in 1971 busily engaged in subverting the Bengali cause. Their continued links with Pakistan, as late as in 1974, remain proof of their perfidy.

There are newspapers in this country which take asinine pride in refusing to accord Bangabandhu his place in history. For the men behind these publications, Mujib has never been Bangabandhu. You double over with laughter when you see the pains these men go through when they refuse to accept the official term of the August 1975 killers' trial as the Bangabandhu murder trial and instead

continue to call it the Mujib murder trial. For these men, Bangabandhu was no higher than being president of Bangladesh. And the four national leaders murdered in prison in November 1975 were no more than four Awami League leaders.

Ah, but that is human nature. And what a specimen of it! Has it ever occurred to these Bangabandhu baiters, to that woman in the JS, to that superannuated military officer, that their prominence as individuals today has to do with Bangabandhu's struggle, all the way up to 1971?

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Keeping peace, making friends

With the deployment of women peacekeepers, local women are feeling less intimidated. During the civil war it was the men who inflicted harm, and most of the time the sufferers were women and children. On the street, the women peacekeepers are perceived as sober and helpful. They have been able to gain the trust of the public.



HARUN UR RASHID

AS International Women's Day marked its 100th anniversary on March 8, the 21st century presents women with an array of challenges, from gaining skills to waging peace. Women are steadily making inroads into a once male preserve, and one of the best examples is the women peacekeeping contingent of the UN.

Peacekeeping presumes cooperation between parties involved in a conflict and is aimed to keep peace in a conflict-zone. It is not a mission of peace building or peace-making.

Peacekeeping is a delicate task and needs a soft approach. Liberia, a West African country, had witnessed 14 years of civil war that left 200,000 people dead, and survivors are haunted by torture and exploitation by boy soldiers. Its former warlord and

President Charles Taylor has been on trial by an ad-hoc criminal tribunal in *The Hague* since 2006. Liberia elected a Harvard educated woman, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, as president, in 2005.

In 2004, a UN report criticised UN peacekeepers in Liberia for assault and abuse of young women by using food and money. The UN then decided to put women peacekeepers in Liberia, who brought peace in the country.

Liberia is something of a modern experiment with women peacekeepers. The head of the UN mission of peacekeeping is a woman from Denmark, Margrethe Loj, and the peacekeepers are women from Nigeria and India.

President Sirleaf stated that women peacekeepers were more caring and sensitive to people's needs. She was quoted by media as saying: "I think that these are the

characteristics that come from being a mother, taking care of the family, being concerned with children and managing a home."

The Nigerian women, who number 59, largely hold jobs such as supply clerks, nurses police officers, teachers and refugee workers. They live in narrow barracks tacked with photos of smiling little boys and girls left behind at home. For the women, it had been a tough decision to leave their family and they often receive calls from their chil-

drren on domestic issues, such as "mummy, elder sister is not listening to me."

Since 2007, Indian women have stood guard outside the president's office. It is a highly symbolic position for them. The Indian women contingent stands at 103. Some of them are monitoring local police officers. Many of them also patrol the suburbs on foot, and this has led to a drastic fall in home invasions. The women contingent has persuaded many Liberian women to become police officers.

With the deployment of women peacekeepers, local women are feeling less intimidated. During the civil war it was the men who inflicted harm, and most of the time the sufferers were women and children. On the street, the women peacekeepers are perceived as sober and helpful. They have been able to gain the trust of the public.

Carole Ducret, the senior gender adviser to the UN mission in Liberia reportedly said: "We need to go deeper to study the impact that this is having and what aspect is really a good practice. We need to be careful about saying it is fantastic. We need to know why."

Some of the disadvantages for women peacekeepers are separation from their children, homesickness and depression. The UN is to study the effects on the psychology of female peacekeepers and whether any other approach is needed to alleviate the psychological effects on them.

It is reported that the Indian contingent is likely to be replaced by Bangladeshi women peacekeepers. As female participation grows, the issue will be critical for the UN, which is considering shorter and more flexible rotations.

In 1988, Bangladesh first joined the UN peacekeeping mission, whose members were known as "Blue Helmets" (after the blue colour of the UN flag), with only 15 military observers.

So far, about 70,000 soldiers have participated in 35 peacekeeping missions in 26 countries, which includes Cambodia, Bosnia, Georgia, Mozambique, Namibia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. A Bangladeshi army general led the peacekeeping mission in Mozambique in 1994 and another general in Georgia in 2002. Currently, a Bangladeshi general has been leading the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia since October 2008.

Bangladesh is the largest contributing country to provide peacekeeping troops to the UN, whose number stands at 10,574 (soldiers and police personnel). They are deployed in peacekeeping missions in 12 countries.

The peacekeeping missions are often risky in tribal-torn conflicts in Africa, and there were casualties of Bangladeshi peacekeeping troops (nine soldiers) in the Democratic Republic of Congo on February 25, 2005. As of May 2009, a total of 91 valiant Bangladeshi peacekeepers died for the cause of world peace.

Bangladesh, every year on May 29, observes the International Day of UN Peacekeepers. It has set up an Institute of Peace Support Operation Training for the armed forces at Rajendrapur, near Dhaka.

Bangladesh can hold its head high in the global arena because the Bangladeshi soldiers have earned the gratitude of millions in lands far from Bangladesh. They have helped restore tranquillity and peace in many war-torn parts of the globe and have ushered in an era of hope in countries, which had only known despair and war.

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