

31 Bangladeshis in distress

Attend to their SOS

THE woes of 31 Bangladeshi crew on eight foreign ships on the Benin coast go on. One would have thought that by this time meaningful action would have been taken to save them from the dire circumstances in which they have found themselves. That they continue to be caught in a state of misery is not only a matter of sadness but one of sheer outrage as well. Of course their employers are responsible for the state they are in. And of course every effort should be expended to apprehend the unscrupulous men, both in Bangladesh and in the countries of origin of the ships in question, and penalize them for their criminality. It is simply unacceptable that people can do wrong, in this case place other people's lives in jeopardy, and can get away with the act.

Of graver urgency at this point is the question of what the Bangladesh government has been doing to save the 31 Bangladeshis and bring them safely back home. We do realise the fact that the country does not have an embassy in Benin. But that ought not to be ground for the authorities not to utilize other channels in order to carry out their responsibilities to these hapless men who have been going without food and water for the past many days. They do not have visas that will allow them into Benin. And the suspicion is that with no means of keeping their cell phones going, these men will soon go out of touch with the outside world. These are very strong reasons why the Bangladesh government should by now have safely seen these men come back home. Instead, the foreign office has been telling us that it is in touch with our missions in Beijing and Athens in order for them to solicit the assistance of the Benin government about salvaging the 31 Bangladeshis. The approach, as we write this leader, does not seem to have worked since there has been no response from the Benin authorities. One wonders why our missions in such countries as Morocco and Algeria have not been put to work on the problem.

The helplessness of the 31 Bangladeshis raises the very fundamental issue of the responsibilities a state has toward its citizens, especially those who get into problems abroad. The sad tradition for us is that rare has been the instance when the Bangladesh authorities, now or in the past, have come forward to help citizens in distress. One prime responsibility of a nation's diplomatic missions abroad is to lift distressed citizens out of the difficult conditions they may fall into, away from their countries. Given that responsibility and considering the easy means of communications in these times, it is quite inconceivable as to why the foreign office has yet been unable to get in touch with the Benin authorities or undertaken measures on its own to save the crew. Must Bangladeshis in trouble abroad always depend on foreign nations or governments or firms to get back to safety? Where other governments have been known to rush to the defence of their citizens abroad, literally as well as figuratively, ours have always demonstrated a penchant for indifference or deliberately slow action. That is neither acceptable nor understandable.

We expect swift action on the part of the government. Let these 31 Bangladeshis be brought home without further delay.

For an inclusive enrolment policy

A five-pronged strategy needed

WITH well over 50 percent dropout from the fifth grade in school, the national goal of education for all by 2014 is evidently not on track to fulfillment. Huge planned efforts are needed backed by financial investment and targeted commitments to make it possible within just about four years.

The causes of dropout are all pretty much known, the principal ones being poverty, social exclusion and lack of schooling in remote areas. Now, we have to prioritise the problem areas and steam ahead addressing them squarely.

A point of caution needs to be spelt out at the outset, this relating to making sure that in our endeavour for quantity, quality is not lost sight of. The literacy that we aim to universalise should be truly functional and that it will be of life-long utility through appropriate reorientation interventions.

From the roundtable titled "A National Priority for Education for all (EFA): Reaching Vulnerable Children" organised by this paper, Campaign for Popular Education (Campe) and Save the Children on Thursday emerged a five-point formulation of a virtual stratagem. First and foremost, local bodies like union parishads and upazilas would have to be involved to ensure enrolment and roll back dropouts, the focus being on vulnerable groups. Second, the local bodies and the NGOs should work in coordination with each other to implement the programmes targeted at the hard-to-reach children. Third, programmes to offer midday meals and stipends would have to be extensively implemented. Fourth, primary education ought to be made a precondition for gaining access to social safety net programmes. Last but not least, the employers of child workers should be made responsible for the basic education of those under their employ.

Two fundamentally important points should be borne in mind simultaneously. Even with the current enrolment figure the teacher:student ratio is highly adverse. For a radical improvement in the situation the dire need is to set up strings of teachers training institutes to turn out new generation of teachers. This issue is intertwined with that of quality education.

Finally, we in the media must make it into a mission to generate more information with the help of the educational authorities, government and NGOs in order to (a) bolster awareness and sensitisation campaigns; (b) bring up the marginalised and vulnerable into a new focus; and (c) highlight success stories as inspirational guidelines for helping replication.



BRETT LAMB/GETTY IMAGES

Will the mud-slinging ever end?

At this critical juncture, mere silence may perhaps bury all fruitless debates. All those who contributed to our independence will find their rightful place in history in the coming years. Sycophancy to extract personal benefit will wane, and a new generation of better-educated leaders will emerge.

ABDUL MUNIM CHOWDHURY

IT might seem witty and smart to belittle political opponents in public gatherings, but does any patriotic citizen with a bit of good taste and love for his country relish such conduct of our elected leaders? Does it help create a better image of Bangladesh?

In most cases, such unconventional and foul pronouncements/conduct make our well-wishers unhappy and tarnish the image of the leaders. The gain is temporary for those leaders but, in the long term, detrimental to our national interest and image. We all enjoy humour that is subtle and delivered in *bhodro bhasha*.

Democracy allows us to express our views, beliefs and philosophy, but does not give us license to behave in an uncivilised way, or to resort to unruly behaviour and foul language. Street language has always been crude, but should it become parliamentary language?

We want to change to a better life for all. How can a nation change when many of its

leaders are incapable of using polite language and expression, or conducting themselves properly. Polite speech and behavior do not cost anything, so why do our leaders resort to crude language in public and even in parliament?

The people elected the members of the parliament to lead the nation, guide the people, help reduce poverty and illiteracy, and above all create a healthy environment for democracy to flourish in. They are not expected to dig into the past, but to look at the present and see how to improve the lot of the poor masses. Unless we start living in the present, we will not be able to forget the past.

Bangabandhu is in the heart and soul of each and every Bengali of this nation as the founder of Bangladesh, and no one will ever have an option to change that.

We gain nothing by defaming our deceased national leaders. To differ is a democratic right but one should not be abusive. What will it cost us if we give due recognition to those who contributed to the attainment of our independence?

Those leaders in the parliament who engage themselves in such defamatory rhetoric should remember what Buddha said: "Spittle will never reach the sky but comes down on the one who spits."

At this critical juncture, mere silence may perhaps bury all fruitless debates. All those who contributed to our independence will find their rightful place in history in the coming years. Sycophancy to extract personal benefit will wane, and a new generation of better-educated leaders will emerge.

Neutral intellectuals and historians without political alliances will come to the fore and will have freedom to write without fear the correct history of Bangladesh's independence. Our future generations will also be free from the politicians who are ever ready to strike hard at their opponents without mercy.

Unbecoming words spoken in the parliament do not speak well of the parliamentarian. People resort to such tasteless tactics to please their easily winnable political bosses and extract undeserved favour.

Let us be patient and wait for a change to come from the younger generation. In the meantime, let us work to change our economic destiny, give better education to our children, build our character, and free our citizens from corruption.

A nation without past glory might not have a future either. Use of abusive language in the parliament and defaming of

deceased leaders do not provide a good example to our youths, who do not have many good leadership models to follow. Will our people once again see non-controversial patriotic leaders like Deshbandhu C.R. Das, Netaji Subash Bose and Bidhashagar? They were the pride of the Bengali race.

It is not desirable to be led by religious sentiments in this age of reason. We need to open the door to our younger generation to appreciate secular beliefs, and take pride in our Bengali heritage. A heritage that has taught us good behaviour, building of good character, and love and respect for elders. Above all, the ability to sacrifice and to control greed and corruption will largely determine the future of Bangladesh.

If only some of our leaders in art, culture and literature, business, politics and bureaucracy could control their greed then our younger generation could have a chance to find someone to lead them by example.

They may help fight hunger, disease, poverty and miserable living conditions. They may be able to create opportunities for most people to develop their abilities and talents and help to get rid of those political leaders and bureaucrats who are corrupt. The corrupt ones who pretend to help people by proposing solutions are, in reality, creating more trouble than solving.

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A half measure

Pakistan can probably teach a lesson to India by taking action against those who ousted the elected government of Nawaz Sharif and sat on the *gaddi* forcibly. India should have done so after the emergency by not only punishing the guilty politicians but also the civil servants who became a willing toll of tyranny.

KULDIP NAYAR

THERE was a document, called Charter of Democracy, which the presidents of Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League signed at London on May 14, 2006. Both of them, the late Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, called upon the people of Pakistan to join hands to save their "motherland from the clutches of military dictatorship and to defend their fundamental, social, political and economic rights and for a democratic, federal, modern and progressive Pakistan as dreamt by the founder of the nation."

When I read the Constitution's 18th amendment, I did not find anything in it for the political parties, particularly the PPP and the Muslim League, to go gaga over it. There is nothing in the amendment to stall a military coup.

Pakistan had the consensus-based constitution when the nation adopted it in 1973 under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Yet General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf marched in the army when they so desired to crush all institutions under their jackboots. Zia did something worse when he wrenched out even the semblance of pluralism that the constitution reflected.

When I asked Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in an interview after the Bangladesh war if he could guarantee that the military would not take over again, as was his experience when General Mohammad Ayub imposed martial law, Bhotto said this time his men would come on to the streets and face the tanks. However, when Bhutto was arrested by

Zia and detained at Murree, not even a dog barked. The nation slipped into martial law rule as easily as a person would into new clothes. It looked as if it did not matter to the people who the ruler was.

The 18th amendment is a step towards restoring democracy. Pakistan has yet to prove to the world that it has become a democratic country. The nation showed the signs of a liberated country when people rallied behind the lawyers to put back Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhary in his seat.

It is clear that the judiciary has become free. But the supremacy of the National Assembly, Pakistan's parliament, is yet to be established. The unanimous vote on the 18th amendment is an important step to prove it. The question that remains is: Will people defend the fragile democratic polity, which Pakistan has acquired, if it is challenged by a civilian dictator or a military chief?

India has one of the best constitutions in the world. Yet, it lost the democratic system when Mrs. Indira Gandhi took to totalitarian ways and imposed the dictatorship. The apolitical military in the country rightly stood aloof to let the affairs of governance be settled by the people themselves.

Indeed, they did when they put democracy back on the rails. They gave the Congress such a humiliating defeat at the polls that the party was wiped out in northern India. Candidates put up by the opposition won by a margin of lakhs. This was the people's anger against the temerity to replace democracy with personal rule.

Pakistan should learn one thing more from India; how to restrain its National

Assembly from becoming dictatorial and changing the basic structure of the constitution. The Supreme Court of India has held in the Keshavanand Bharti case that parliament cannot change the basic structure of the constitution.

Democracy, secularism and the federal structure of the polity are considered three pillars of the constitution. Similarly, Pakistan can have democracy, the country's Islamic character, the federal structure and pluralism as the basic structure of the constitution.

Yet, the sad experience, again at the hands of Mrs. Gandhi, cannot be rubbed off easily. She gagged the press and suspended the fundamental rights. The judiciary caved in. The Supreme Court upheld 4-1 the imposition of the emergency. This is something akin to the verdict of the Pakistan Supreme Court gave when it justified military coups by inventing an unconstitutional "doctrine of necessity."

Therefore, there is a "no go" from an awakened society. People and the media have to stay vigilant and uncompromising when it comes to the question of attacks on democracy. They must resist prize or pressure, and they have to tell the truth because they are the custodians of free expression.

Pakistan can probably teach a lesson to India by taking action against those who ousted the elected government of Nawaz Sharif and sat on the *gaddi* forcibly. India should have done so after the emergency by not only punishing the guilty politicians but also the civil servants who became a willing toll of tyranny.

The Shah Commission, which pointed out the emergency excesses and proposed measures to stop the nightmare of authoritarianism from occurring again, was denounced when Mrs. Gandhi returned to power. Had the perpetrators of the emergency been punished there would have been a lesson taught to the saboteurs of democracy.

Unfortunately, some people who played a leading role during the emergency are members of Prime Minister Manmohan

Singh's cabinet. Punishment to those who violate the constitution is the only way to ward off a repetition.

In this context, the power given to the president of the ruling party, through the 18th amendment, to remove the prime minister can lead to dictatorship by the party chief. The prime minister should be removed by parliament alone.

The example of Mrs. Gandhi's fight against the old timers in the Congress is still fresh in the nation's mind. They removed her from the party but could not win because she enjoyed a majority in the house. The old timers came a cropper.

The point on which Pakistan's 18th amendment has excelled India is on defection. In India, MPs do not have the freedom of conscience. They must obey the party whip or lose their membership. In Pakistan, a member of the Senate or the National Assembly can defy the party whip, except on the finance bill or a motion of no-confidence.

Still such progressive measures are very few in the 18th amendment. They definitely fall short of what the Charter of Democracy pointed out "...the threats to its survival, the erosion of the federation's unity, the military's subordination of all state institutions, the marginalisation of civil society, the mockery of the constitution and representative institutions, growing poverty, unemployment and inequality, brutalisation of society, breakdown of rule of law and the unprecedented hardships facing our people under a military dictatorship, which has pushed our beloved country to the brink of a total disaster."

There is no such categorical statement in the 18th amendment, or even in the speeches made by the treasury bench. Both PPP and the Muslim League have to re-read the Charter of Democracy, which had recommended 26 amendments to the constitution and 36 other measures. The 18th amendment remains only a half measure.

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