

## Another victim of violence against women

*The perpetrator should not escape justice*

THE burn unit of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) bears witness to another act of barbarity on a woman by her husband. As reported on the back page of the Thursday issue of this paper, day labourer Swapan scalded her wife Shikha Khandaker with boiling water because she failed to bring the one lakh taka he had demanded a second time as dowry, though he already received one lakh taka during their wedding 15 years back. Hapless Shikha, as the report goes, was no stranger to tortures like regular beating at her husband's hands, but she suffered all through silently. This last act of outrage might also have gone unnoticed had she not landed up in the burn unit of DMCH.

We have no word to condemn this outrage committed against Shikha Khondker. At the same time, we are aware, though, that mere condemnation is not the right response to stop these kinds of act of heartlessness and cruelty to which women remain a perennial victim. And as before, society at large is a silent spectator to such barbarities against women. With Shikha, we have already had an unending march of women thus dehumanised and brutalised by husbands, in-laws, jilted lovers or road-side bullies.

In Shikha's case, for example, it may have been her continued silence in the face of tortures as well as acquiescence of her family in her husband's undue and illegitimate demands for dowry. Those have only gone to whet the husband's greed further and embolden him to inflict still worse kind of torture on her.

Why had Shikha to suffer like this at a time when there are specific laws to deal with dowry-related issues as well as repression against women and children? And it is not only with this particular case that the victim suffered without taking recourse to appropriate law. And as in most other cases, it has been lack of awareness, education, poverty and old family values that came in the way.

Granted it is the various limitations that constrain an individual female victim to seek legal shelter from such tyranny. But then what constrains us to punish the errant husband for his misdeed? Sadly though, in most cases of such male violence against women, society plays the role of a mere onlooker. Few cases, that are lucky enough to get media coverage or draw the attraction of civil rights or legal aid bodies, get any redress, if at all.

As a result of this general indifference of society, people like Swapan are getting away with their outrageous acts with impunity.

It is time we declared our zero tolerance against such monstrosity against women. The rights groups, NGOs, legal aid bodies and the media need to fight this social injustice as one and bring the offenders to justice.

## Drive against old vehicles

*Let it not cause chaos for commuters*

THE authorities launched a fresh drive against old vehicles on city streets yesterday. When the decision was made to go after vehicles that were between twenty and twenty-five years old, we welcomed the move, albeit with the suggestion that it be implemented in such a way that left commuters' movement undisturbed. We reiterate the same point today, for the particular reason that the drive against old vehicles must not in any way create any dislocation for the thousands of city dwellers who happen to use such transport on a daily basis while commuting back and from work.

The basic idea in all this move against old vehicles ought to be to put in place alternative arrangements for commuters. In this regard, it is important that the government, especially the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), clarify its actual transport position so that citizens have a fairly good idea of what to expect should a dislocation set in as a result of the drive. Equally important is the matter of what private transport owners can do to keep the momentum of daily commuting going for citizens. Of course, the drive will affect a good number of these transport owners themselves since it is their vehicles which have been plying on the streets for long. Even so, they must think of alternative arrangements of transport not only in the interest of citizens but also in their own economic interest. The point here is that while a drive against dilapidated vehicles is surely important, it is also necessary that the probable void that will be created by a sudden action against such vehicles is avoided or minimized as much as possible under the circumstances.

Indeed, we believe (and we have said it earlier too) that rather than decree an end to all old vehicles on the roads at one go, the authorities should go for a phased programme that will allow them as well as private transport owners time to replace the vehicles that are put out of operation. That will be one way of averting the chaos which might otherwise be the result of any other kind of action. And let us say here that the drive against old vehicles must not be half-hearted. Earlier too we experienced similar drives, with everything fizzling out at some point. Let there be no repeat of the old inconclusive exercise in this fresh drive against old vehicles.

One last point: it is not merely dilapidated vehicles that ought to be the purpose of the drive, but an altogether wholesale measure aimed at ensuring that skilled, trained drivers are behind the wheels of public transport. Their knowledge of road regulations, their behaviour with passengers as also with other road users, et cetera, must be part of the programme.



DAVID C. CHEN GETTY IMAGES

Putting the pieces in place.

## Six months on

Even though there have been isolated successes and advances, all in all, one cannot credibly argue that there has been anything like the tectonic shift in terms of tone and approach that one would have hoped to see after January. Things are very much the way they were before.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

NEW Delhi: It is now 6 months since the groundbreaking summit between Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promised to usher in a new era of mutual cooperation between the two countries.

As one who had confidently predicted that the summit would be but the first step in a long-odded and wide-ranging re-evaluation and reformulation of the bilateral relationship, I think it is important that we continue to examine where things are going and to assess the progress.

So where are we after 6 months? Now, it is true that perhaps this is too short a time in which to make any definitive assessment, but it has to be said that the first six months of this new era of co-operation have proved to be discouraging. I honestly cannot see any difference in Indo-Bangladesh rela-

tions, either in tone or in substance, from the way things were before the summit last January.

What is especially discouraging is that at the time it was acknowledged on the Indian side that Sheikh Hasina had really staked a lot on things getting better, and that it was incumbent on the Indian side to reciprocate.

Nevertheless, even though there have been isolated successes and advances, all in all, one cannot credibly argue that there has been anything like the tectonic shift in terms of tone and approach that one would have hoped to see after January. Things are very much the way they were before.

Part of the problem is doubtless structural. After all, it doesn't matter how much the Indian government promises. It is the Indian bureaucracy which is the party that must deliver, to say nothing of other institutions, such as the border guards, that the Indian government appears to be incapa-

ble (or unwilling) to control.

And, of course, on the Bangladeshi side, there is also a tremendous lack of capacity to move things along and to take advantage of openings offered.

Faced with the twin problems of Bangladeshi lack of capacity and Indian bureaucracy, it was always going to be slow going. But it is more than just that. What I find worrisome is that the tone of bilateral relations hasn't changed. There seems to be no recognition that extra efforts need to be made and that the relationship needs constant work and nurturing.

The problem exists on both sides, as far as I can tell. Speaking of Indian officials about Indian obligations and what might be done to smooth relations and address long-standing grievances, there is no sense of urgency, no sense of historic opportunity, no sense that if India doesn't step up to the plate that this opportunity will have been squandered.

All I ever hear are the same old complaints, the same old frustrations, the same old inability to appreciate legitimate Bangladeshi concerns, the same old dismissal of what is important to us, the same old inability to distinguish between unacceptable anti-Indian sentiment and a genuine sense of grievance.

Of course, the problem exists on our side of the border, too. The sense of Bangladeshi

grievance continues to grow. The sense that the Indians really aren't serious about better and more equal relations, and never will be. The sense that India will never give Bangladesh a fair deal at the negotiating table.

If it is not too melodramatic to import a phrase from the Middle East, what we need between Bangladesh and India are partners for peace. There need to be people on both sides of the border who are genuinely committed to reform and a better relationship and who are genuinely willing to try to see things from the other side's point of view, to see what problems the other side might have, and to be sensitive to their political and psychological imperatives.

When I was last in New Delhi shortly after the January summit, at a round-table conference, the question was put to me: Is Bangladesh ready for a better relationship with India? Although I answered in the affirmative then, I am beginning to have my doubts. More to the point, the question was revealing in its one-sidedness. An equally pertinent question would be: Is India ready?

Judging by the evidence of the past six months, I am beginning to fear that neither side is really ready. And what a shame and a loss of historic opportunity it would be if this were true.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

## Policing the police

Needless to say, all laws are moral, but all moral issues may not be legal. For example, helping the needy is a moral obligation. But nobody goes to jail if he doesn't do it.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

TRUE story from Moorestown, New Jersey, in the United States where a police officer was charged with molesting children in 2008. But the country was more horrified when it learned that the officer also had a moonlight tryst with a group of cows. Animal cruelty charges were brought against the man, but the grand jury couldn't determine whether the cattle had consented to the apparent one-night stand.

The judgment may have been funny, but the judge was not. "I'm not saying it's okay," he said in court after dismissing the charges. "This is a legal question for me. It's not a question of morals." That, to me, eloquently speaks about the police conduct this country.

I mean to say, the legal function of the police is largely influenced by their moral dilemma. These law-enforcers are human beings first, mere mortals of flesh and blood. They are also citizens afterwards, like the rest of us.

If three men have died in police custody

in the past weeks, that was neither the first instance of alleged police brutality nor is it going to be the last. In the past, police have raped, abducted, robbed and extorted money. In future we might see the same, if not worse.

It's the same story throughout the government. The bureaucrats are not doing their job, we hear. The customs people, tax people, teachers, lawyers, judges and even those entrusted with government printing are finding ways to shirk their duties and make money instead. And, mind it, all of them are human beings, citizens of this country.

So, this is what we need to sort out first before we isolate the police for their faults. We know it's wrong when a policeman takes bribe, or kills someone in the lockup. But do we look at it from a legal or moral angle? Needless to say, all laws are moral, but all moral issues may not be legal. For example, helping the needy is a moral obligation. But nobody goes to jail if he doesn't do it.

The reason I say it is that moral judgment is a relative thing, and given the state of our

chaotic national mind, one man's wrong is another man's right. People are making money by unfair means to buy luxuries for their families, and they are raising their children with that money, even sending them abroad to get education. Yet, unfortunately, shame and guilt, two fundamentals of human decency, have been banished from this country.

All of these are moral issues, but who is really being punished for them? And, who is really bothered that sooner or later the immoral is bound to descend into the illegal? One doesn't have to be a psychologist to understand that the deranged mind builds its own progressive capacity. A little boy, who is cruel to domestic pets, grows up to become a notorious killer.

The police, for that matter the entire country, has come to this stage at an incremental pace. It didn't happen in a single day that the moral infringed upon the legal to create a confusion that has overtaken this country. In one form this confusion breeds hypocrisy, which leads to corruption. A legal eagle in this country evaded taxes in full confidence that he wasn't guilty since he was never going to get caught. Here the moral façade was hiding legal infractions.

We have also seen the opposite form after 1/11, which showed that getting caught didn't mean one was guilty. There the legal façade was covering up moral

delusions. The police come somewhere in the middle. Intermediate between security guards and the minions of powerful men, it's a pity that they can't overcome their identity crisis.

My friend once visited an inspector general of police and complained against a man, who had forcibly taken his house. The knavish man turned out to be a brother-in-law of the IGP's college buddy. So the chief law-keeper spoke like the usurper-in-chief, and hinted that his visitor give up the house.

A group of mid-ranking police officers recently tried to explain that the police had their reasons, and what they said pretty much sounded like a housewife who goes for compulsive shopping when she gets upset. They said they were driven by their frustration at work due to neglect from the government, disregard from other men in uniforms, and, above all, humiliation from politicians who treat them, I am quoting one ASP, like "eunuchs in a harem."

The criminals also give almost the same kind of excuse. They lash out at the world, because it lashed out at them. I say we are living in dangerous times. We the people are like those cows in the American small town. The police are police, and the judge is judge. We can't even bring cruelty charges against them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. E-mail: badrul151@yahoo.com.