

## Our heroes on a hijacked ship

So what do we do once we know who hijacked *MV Jahan Moni* and why? Our government, after ascertaining the facts, must seek the assistance of relevant regional and international agencies to rescue the crew and the lady first. Their safety should be our first priority.

ASHEFAQUR RAHMAN

THE extraordinary news of the hijacking of Bangladeshi ship *MV Jahan Moni*, belonging to Brave Royal Ship Management, has shocked us. The merchant ship was carrying nickel and was sailing from Indonesia to Greece after refueling at Singapore. According to reports, a group of pirates attacked the bulk carrier off the Indian port of Cochin on the afternoon of December 5, and it was last seen by satellites to be heading towards the Somali coast. Twenty-six Bangladeshi are on board, of which twenty-five are crew members and one lady, who is the spouse of the chief engineer.

Till December 10, neither the government of Bangladesh nor the ship management was able to contact the crew. It is still not clear who the hijackers are, what their intentions are, and whether they will announce their terms for the crew and the ship's release. According to reports, a task force has been constituted with government and international agencies to handle the matter.

News reports also say that help has been sought from the Indian Coast Guard, the Mumbai Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre, the Dubai based UK MTO and the Singapore based International Maritime Bureau. It is suggested that once the ship reaches the Somali coast then it may be possible to communicate with the crew and the pirates.

Piracy is not new in the Indian Ocean. It was in practice for centuries when traders used ships to transport valuable cargo between different destinations in the region. Historically, the Arabs for several centuries were the main seafaring traders and went as far as China, but kept a sharp eye out for pirates and deterred them from disrupting their commercial activity.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the scenario changed dramatically in the Indian Ocean. They established trading posts along the coast and insisted that all other trading ships carry a "license," ostensibly issued by the Portuguese colonial authority. If any

ship was unable to show the "papers," it was impounded and the cargo confiscated. According to many historians, they institutionalised piracy in the region.

Historical traces of Portuguese piracy can be seen in the coastal regions of Bangladesh, especially along the Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar and the Barisal coasts. The Portuguese pirates had hide-outs in the jungles and the hills in these areas, and they would attack trading ships when they sailed up the major rivers with their rich cargo.

Their nefarious activity extended as far as the Hoogly river in West Bengal, India. With the coming of the Mughals, piracy continued as they did not have the wherewithal or the ships to contain it. But the British ended the age of marauding by superior force as they brought order in the Indian Ocean to protect their commercial interest.

Pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia started in early 1990's. These attacks were limited and were conducted close to shore. They were largely the work of fishermen displaced by the Somali civil war and foreign fishing in Somali waters.

But this has escalated to new heights. Somali pirates now take hostages and obtain ransom money after seizing vessels indiscriminately. They operate far outside Somali waters and disrupt trade and fishing as far away as the Seychelles. In our case, they have ventured as far away as the Indian coast.

Somali piracy has affected trade throughout the region. To combat this menace, there are several national and multinational counter piracy missions. These operations effectively began in 2008, when the US led Coalition of the Willing Combined Task Force 150 (CTF150), and now CTF 151, was given an anti-piracy mandate. It established a Maritime Security Patrol Area (MPSA) off the Somali coast. Running through the area is an internationally recognised and militarily patrolled transit corridor.

The European Union (EU) also is an active participant in the effort to protect shipping along this portion of the Indian Ocean. The EU naval force, called EUNAVFOR, takes part in joint naval



MV Jahan Moni

operations in this area. Nato also has a counter piracy mission called the Operation Allied Protector, and now Operation Ocean Shield.

There are, of course, national counter piracy missions, which swoop in on the area to protect their national assets and interests. These missions are from China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Yemen. On average, there are 20 or more warships patrolling the MPSA area at any time. Pirates caught and disarmed can be sent to the country interdicting for prosecution and trial. Kenya is a country which often prosecutes these pirates if other countries are unable to do so for various reasons. There is also a Contact Group on piracy off the coast of Somalia for diplomatic and official co-ordination and information sharing.

It is well known that under International Law any warship can search a vessel on the high seas if it is suspected of piracy. All states have an equal claim to prosecute pirates. Prosecution does not require the permission of the pirate's state of nationality.

So what do we do once we know who hijacked *MV Jahan Moni* and why? Our government, after ascertaining the facts, must seek the assistance of relevant regional and international agencies to rescue the crew and the lady first. Their safety should be our first priority. We must study carefully what has been done in similar cases by other countries that had been victims of piracy. How did they rescue the crew of their hijacked vessels?

In any case the ordeal of the Bangladeshi victims is the ordeal of our

nation. We must suitably recognise their valour in facing this unexpected challenge. In the eyes of many they are our heroes and a heroine.

The second priority is the ship itself and its cargo. The government, with the help of the ship's owner, should ensure its safe passage to its destination. The prosecution and trial of the pirates, if they can be apprehended alive, must be attended to. We should be seen to be a responsible nation and follow due process as laid down by international law.

We must also set up on a permanent basis a state-of-the-art monitoring of piracy and a prevention unit in the Ministry of Shipping or in the Ministry of Defense. Early warning about possible acts of piracy must be put in place so that ship captains are aware of impending dangers.

Bangladesh's exports and imports are burgeoning. Chartering of Bangladesh owned vessels is also on the increase as several companies have acquired ships at low cost during the recent worldwide recession. The nation's commercial interest cannot fall victim to a few marauders who can at will asphyxiate us. Our trade with the Middle East and Europe passes through this critical path to the Gulf of Aden and through the Suez Canal and beyond.

We cannot afford to be complacent. Our diplomats should be heard speaking loudly about crushing sea piracy in all international anti-piracy forums. Bangladesh's short and medium-term interest could be at stake if we do not take the right steps now.

Ashfaqur Rahman is a former Ambassador and Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies.

## The young child -- the whole child

While the objective of preschool expansion for children of age 5-6 years is well accepted, no clear strategy or goal has emerged yet regarding the services for total development of the younger children -- cognitive, social and emotional, as well as, physical development of children until they reach the preschool stage.

MANZOOR AHMED

THE first-ever South Asia regional conference on early childhood development (ECD) ended in Dhaka on December 9. The three day meeting at the Bangabandhu International Centre was attended by four hundred people, including over a hundred academics, researchers and practitioners from all the South Asian countries and renowned experts from USA, UK, Canada, Australia and elsewhere. The Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN) and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network on Early Childhood (ARNEC) jointly hosted the South Asian Conference.

At the closing plenary, Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, the Minister of State for Women and Children's Affairs, spoke about the vital importance of the early stage of development in the human life cycle. She noted that the "developmental milestones" of young children, from birth to five years, have different dimensions -- physical development, social and emotional development, thinking skills, and communication skills.

The government has committed itself to expanding preschool services. Pre-schooling is seen as a strategy to improve quality of primary education and address the serious dropout, retention, and attendance problems in primary schools. There are plans to open some 37,000 preschool classes in government primary schools with the appointment of a teacher in each school for this purpose.



Teach them while they are still young.

This is a much needed step to help children, especially the first generation learners whose parents often are without literacy skills, prepare well for primary school. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the responsible government agency, the Directorate of Primary Education, would do well to carry out this initiative in close cooperation with NGOs that have been offering preschool education in many communities.

Some 20,000 preschools are run by NGOs in addition to about 8,000 run under the auspices of a Unicef-supported project of the Shishu Academy, mostly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts districts. A process of teacher preparation, supervision, designing of

curricular content and provision for learning materials has emerged in both the NGO and the Shishu Academy programmes.

BEN the ECD Resource Center at Brac University, which is the secretariat of the Network, have assisted in training, curriculum review and materials development. It would make good

stage of life is not anybody's specific responsibility in the government. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs formally has the portfolio of children, as its title suggests. It, however, has yet to establish the organisational structure or entity to take the lead on behalf of the government in maintaining an oversight and coordinating the efforts and initiatives of various government agencies, NGOs and the private sector.

Different approaches can be taken to develop an organisational capacity in the government for looking after the interest of children and promoting children's total development. Sri Lanka has had a Children's Secretariat since 1979 with professional people within its staff and engaged as advisers within the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. India has set up a statutory National Children's Commission, with its chair given the authority of a justice of the Supreme Court.

A comprehensive early childhood development policy is under consideration. A revision of the National Children's policy is underway. In these initiatives the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs is expected to provide the lead.

The fulfilment of Vision 2021 and the preparation of the sixth five year national development plan will require the ministry to uphold the interest of children forcefully. More importantly, the ministry has to oversee and monitor the implementation of these policies and plans in cooperation with major stakeholders. An appropriate solution must be found to strengthen the management and technical capacity of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs for it to do justice to its mandate.

Dr. Manzoor Ahmed is the Chair of the Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN).

## Human rights in Bangladesh

*Our aspirations are at variance with the reality*

THE observance of International Human Rights Day in Bangladesh yesterday could not have happened in sorerrier circumstances. For all the fanfare associated with a celebration of the day, through seminars, symposia and the like, the fact remains that in today's Bangladesh, there is a blight which casts its shadows over the rights that citizens are morally and constitutionally entitled to enjoy. Justice Mohammad Habibur Rahman puts it in perspective for us when he notes that the executive branch of government possesses neither the skills nor the power to protect human rights. That is a severe indictment of the authorities. Add to that the fact that there is hardly any meaningful exhortation from the powers that be about the need to guarantee human rights through taking swift action against those who have continued to demonstrate a cavalier attitude to them through a systematic violation of them.

We cannot forget the glorious tradition that our people have set over the decades in the cause of democracy and freedom. It was particularly through the 1960s and early 1970s and again between the mid-1980s and early 1990s that Bangladesh's people spontaneously waded into the struggle for a reassertion of their rights. That being the reality, it is a matter of profound regret that when it comes to a preservation and upholding of fundamental human rights as guaranteed by the constitution, successive governments in the country have repeatedly failed to live up to expectations. Not only during times of extra-constitutional regimes but in the era of elected civilian government as well have we noticed a clear, persistent and disturbing trend toward a reluctance to reassure citizens that their rights are safe and secure in the hands of the state. In the past many years, beginning with the BNP-led government elected in 2001 and continuing into the present Awami League-led administration, innumerable citizens have died in so-called crossfires without the authorities making any move to take to task the security forces personnel responsible for such heinous acts. When one adds to these 'crossfire' killings the number of deaths in police custody, one must ask why democracy must remain prey to forces that are a clear throwback to darker times. Instances of people being taken on remand and subjected to inhuman torture, cases of disappearances and mass arrests of citizens on the eve of opposition political programmes are a clear repudiation of all the democratic values we have tried so hard to uphold in Bangladesh.

The sentiments which have emerged from this year's observance of Human Rights Day must act as a call to corrective action by the state. It does not help that the police, who should be in the forefront of the struggle for the protection of human rights, are today considered the most corrupt segment of Bangladeshi society. It does not help either that the executive branch remains insensitive to its obligations to the nation. There is of course the judiciary which has of late taken action against certain manifest rights violations. The question, however, is: how many cases of human rights come before the judiciary and how many of those can it logically tackle?

The issue of human rights must exercise the minds of the government, from the prime minister to the rest of the cabinet and all the way down to parliament and the civil and police administration. A society which prides itself on its adherence to democratic aspirations and yet remains helpless before those who see nothing wrong in demeaning citizens through flinging their rights to the winds is condemned to a dark, forbidding future.

## Image building through exposition of our culture

*An option that awaits fuller utilisation*

BANGLADESH has a great potential and opportunity to make its mark in the world by projecting her culture through heritage shows overseas like India and Sri Lanka have been doing. This was stated at a news conference held by Bangladesh Arts Council (BAC) ahead of a heritage show last Thursday. Bangladeshi culture has a unique history of 2500 years. We have a rich heritage, full of diversity and some distinct characteristics which need to be presented in a coherent and attractive manner to the outside world.

One route to take is through bilateral cultural exchange programmes held between friendly countries. The other path we can take is one of staging heritage shows in important capitals of different continents where we would like to aim at image dividends.

Bangladeshi culture is replete with music, dance, theatre, art and craft, folklore and sufi traditions, literature, philosophy and ethos, festivals and celebrations as well as its distinct cuisine, the last-named already popularised by Bangladeshi Diaspora.

Particularly noteworthy is the stride we have made in painting and sculpture. Several of our artists have won global acclaim. The works of Zainul Abedin, Sultan, Qamrul Hassan, Shahabuddin Ahmed, SM Nobin, Hashem Khan and many others of the new generation symbolise the country's dynamic culture. Moreover, handicraft and cottage industry are playing a vital role not only economically but also culturally.

The usual focus on the incidence of natural disasters, squalor and sheer poverty in the West must change into a recognition of a 'positive' Bangladesh. Cultural stereotyping is a dangerous practice which should be given up if a harmonious and truly interdependent world is to be achieved. We must be prepared to learn from an enrich each other.

We can say that we may not be rich economically but we are rich culturally. But the ignorance about our own traditions and culture, especially among the new generations needs to be turned into an enthusiastic internalisation of our cultural moorings and cultivation of our culture in all its forms. Simultaneously, the government and the private corporate sectors must come forward in sponsoring more of cultural events at home and abroad helping to advance Bangladesh's image.