

## The continuing plight of the sailors

*Efforts must be stepped up to free them*

THE state of uncertainty over the fate of the crew of MV Jahan Moni continues. There is little sign of any progress having been made where freeing the crew, now captive at the hands of Somali pirates, is concerned. Since December 5, when the 26 Bangladeshis aboard the vessel were seized off the coast of Somalia, not much headway has been made in the matter of resolving the crisis. It appears that the government has either been playing a rather cautious role or is inclined to think that the problem will somehow sort itself out. To be sure, the authorities have given it out that they are trying out every means possible to free the captives, among whom is the wife of a member of the crew. That has not been enough. And judging by the result as also the feelings of the families of the captive sailors, there is a clear need for the Bangladesh government to go into high gear in the matter of bringing the crew as well as the ship back home in all safety.

The only development in the crisis so far is the demand from the pirates, as the families of the captives tell us, for a ransom of \$9 million from the owning company of the vessel. That demand was made on 12 December, after which ten days have gone by. The worry now is whether the captives are in good shape or not. We would not like to speculate on the worst, but we do bear in mind the fact that the Somali pirates told the owners on 12 December that unless the ransom was made over to them within five days, they would take the lives of the crew. That was a dire threat and one hopes the captors of the crew will not carry it out. But beyond that, the danger for the sailors clearly grows with each passing day. The feeling rises among the families of the hostages that the government may not have been active about bringing a speedy end to the crisis. They have now sought the prime minister's intervention in the matter, for understandable reasons.

The dark nature of the situation cannot be lost on anyone. The Somali pirates have been terrorizing international shipping for long months. With their record for extreme ferocity and inhabiting a country which today is a collapsed state, it is difficult to engage them in direct negotiations. Even so, the government must step up its efforts toward freeing the sailors through making use of every available link. The threat hanging over them is a call for strong, meaningful action on the part of the government.

## A less addressed dimension of air pollution

*Brick kilns need to modernize without let-up*

AMONG the environmental hazards, under the spotlight in the backdrop of climate change-centred concerns, brick kilns make for an issue that is perhaps the least attended to. There is no reason why this should be on the periphery of national consciousness. Brick manufacturing plants stuck with primitive technologies are a major source of carbon emissions into the atmosphere. It would have been a statistical nightmare if the quantum of carbonization of the air through brick kilns was measured and made known.

But we cannot bury our head in the sand to ignore or downplay the dangers any longer, especially when technologies are available to obviate the risk factors. The modern brick manufacturing technologies have three advantages: first, these will minimize air pollution; secondly, help save Tk1120cr annually in fuel cost; and thirdly, these would ensure quality production of bricks.

True, the Department of Environment (DoE) has been organizing seminars to motivate the brick kiln owners to introduce new technologies but the response from the industry appears to have been lukewarm. There are reasons for their taciturn reaction. For, after years of dillydally and lack of determined government monitoring and policy actions, the issue is burdened by a huge backlog of default. It is now a case of mounting pressure being exerted on the owners to comply with a government circular issued last September to introduce environment-friendly technologies in two years' time. The deadline seems stiff but not impossible to comply with.

The owners are accusing the authorities of frequently changing technologies for burning bricks. In the first place, there was the requirement of 120ft chimney, then comes the insistence on Zig Zag Kiln, Hybrid Hoffman Kiln or Vertical Shaft Kiln systems. These require huge investments. For all we know, favourable response could be received from multilateral agencies and some of our development partners to assist us in introducing the new technologies. For its part, the government should think of bank lending to brick kiln operators. Furthermore, the brick manufacturers should be obliged to largely invest for the change-over given the advantages to accrue from it, in addition to the galloping demands for bricks in the construction sectors.

## It's all in the family . . .

It will be a long time before we can put our families behind us, and not just in politics. As recently as two decades ago, we did not faintly consider the notion of the children of musicians making their way into the world of melody only because they happened to have been sired by reputed singers and song makers. Now, no one is even remotely suggesting that these children ought not to have been there.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has asked her ministers and ministers of state to stay away from pushing forth their relatives or family members at the upcoming municipality elections. By any measure that is a good gesture. The question, though, is whether her directives will throw up the kind of response

we can all be comfortable with. Family, after all, is something we have not quite been able to shake off in public life.

Much as the prime minister would like to convince us that her exhortations will work, the truth is that the family of the powerful and the influential is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. A measure of that is to be spotted in the recent sighting of the prime ministerial

son at state celebrations of Victory Day. Of course the offspring of heads of state and governments have the right, like everyone else, to celebrate the country and its ethos. But for the electronic media to focus on such offspring is somehow not comforting.

If you recall, only a few years ago another prime ministerial child, this one the much talked about and much controversial elder son of Begum Khaleda Zia, was observed on stage as a special guest on a day that was a celebration of the nation's air force. No one was able to explain what this young man, a joint secretary general of the (then ruling) Bangladesh Nationalist Party, was doing there or why the air force was pampering him in such obsequious manner.

It will be a long time before we can put our families behind us, and not just in politics. As recently as two decades ago, we did not faintly consider the notion of the children of musicians making their way into the world of melody only because they happened to have been sired by reputed singers and song makers. Now, no one is even remotely suggesting that these children ought not to have been there. What does concern us, however, is that these wonderful young people have rather had an easy time of it considering that they have had behind them famous parents to promote their cause.

Some of these children sing well. You do not question their ability. But should they not have come to centre-stage like any other struggling artiste of the country? When you listen to the songs of a large number of these second-generation musicians, you somehow know that quality is what they do not have in satisfactory measure. That, ladies and gentlemen, is one more instance of how some families have imposed themselves on the country.

In the world of movies and drama, much a similar strain is to be perceived. There are fathers who have been remarkable, if not exactly powerful, actors in Bangladesh's film industry. Memories of the movies they played varied roles in are part of our sensibilities. We still relish

going back to those days of black and white, of innocence as it substantiated the romance in the tales coming our way. And then turn to what their children have done in later movies. The acting has been mediocre to the point of being inane.

Did these children of the old-timers have to be pushed into Bangladesh's filmdom? Are we expected to believe that in this country of a hundred and six million people there is truly a dearth of talented young men and women who could give us some world class movies? The answer is no. But these young men and women do not have the advantage that those children of the famous have. We are speaking of connections here.

If you have been keeping tabs on the world of Bangladesh's theatre, you will have had cause to spot the influx of the family into our drama. And you will have been disappointed, for the cerebral, incisive role-playing you have observed in an earlier generation of artistes is what you do not come by in their children. Yes, those children are there on the screen all right. You do not see the sparks in them.

Ah, the family! Not even the media world is free of it, especially when the matter is one of owners keen to pass on the torch to a new generation, which in this case means their children. Once that is done, all sorts of confusion come up as a consequence. There are gross instances of the children of newspaper owners cheerfully leading the organisation to extinction through inexperience once their parents have passed from the scene. There are children of newspaper owners who have plunged the organisation into chaos through an intensification of feuding in the family.

The family, you see, is part of our lives today. Count the men and women in the Jatiyo Sangsad. You will come away a touch surprised, a dash shocked. Cousins mingle with one another, brothers sit close to each other. And so it goes on.

And it will, despite that prime ministerial admonition to ministers and ministers of state.

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## Cooperation, not competition

The two sides decided to establish a mechanism of regular exchange of visits between heads of state and government. They welcomed the opening of the telephone hotline between the prime minister of India and the Chinese premier and agreed on regular consultations between the two leaders on issues of importance to both countries.

HARUN UR RASHID

ON December 15, Chinese PM Wen Jiabao began a three-day official visit to India to boost trade between the two Asian giants, whose relationship has been dogged by mutual distrust since they fought a brief border war in 1962.

This visit of the prime minister aims to strengthen ties and put their history of animosity behind them.

On January 13, 2008, India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh paid an official for three days to China to boost relations with its neighbour. He met with both President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. The Indian leader called engagement with China an "imperative necessity."

In July 2010, National Security Adviser and former Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon travelled to Beijing on a three-day visit. In a brief statement, the external affairs ministry announced that he had been designated as "Special Envoy of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh."

Wen Jiabao -- who last visited India five years ago -- brings with him one of the largest teams of Chinese business leaders ever to visit India, about 400 of them.

The number dwarfs that of business persons taken to India by US President Barack Obama (215), French President Nicolas Sarkozy (more than 60) and British Prime Minister David Cameron (about 40).

Wen's trip began with a visit to a school to discuss Chinese culture, a week after the Indian government introduced Mandarin to the school syllabus.

On December 15 the Chinese prime minister said in New Delhi: "There is enough space in the world for the development of China and India and enough areas for us both to cooperate."

The visit has provided India an opportunity to discuss with China a wide range

of issues, including UN reforms, regional dialogue and global issues such as climate change, energy security and counter-terrorism.

The Chinese premier held talks with his Indian counterpart, Manmohan Singh, External Affairs Minister S.M.



Wen Jiabao and Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Krishna and the ruling Congress Party chief Sonia Gandhi.

Dr. Singh responded in kind to Wen's effusive words before they went into a meeting behind closed doors: "A strong partnership between India and China will contribute to long-term peace, stability, prosperity and development in Asia and the world."

China reiterated its support for India's aspirations to play a greater role in the Security Council, but stopped short of expressing full backing for India, which President Obama gave.

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phone hotline between the prime minister of India and the Chinese premier and agreed on regular consultations between the two leaders on issues of importance to both countries.

India's growing consumer market, skilled human resources, and software excellence, with China's own market, its manufacturing capacity and cost effectiveness provide the platform for cooperation.

China is India's largest trading partner -- two-way trade volumes are set to hit \$60 billion this fiscal year. Both sides agreed to raise bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2015. The two sides agreed to take measures to promote more Indian exports to China and to reduce India's

Total investment by China in India is small, amounting to only \$221 million in 2009, representing about 0.1 percent of China's total outward foreign direct investment in that year. That figure is seven times less than what China has invested in Pakistan, according to official data.

Despite strengthening close economic relations, tensions between them remain. China and India have a contested border that runs 3,500 kilometres. India argues that China occupies 38,000 square kilometres (14,670 square miles) of its territory in the west, while Beijing claims the whole of the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which is 90,000 square kilometres in area.

There has been steady progress on the boundary talks and the two sides are "determined" to uphold a 1993 frontier peace accord. They agreed to make renewed efforts to resolve the Himalayan border dispute over which they fought a brief war in 1962.

However, Beijing complained in 2009 about visits by the Indian prime minister and exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims in full.

China is strongly critical of India for granting residence to the Dalai Lama. Last August, India cancelled defence exchanges after China refused a visa to a Kashmir-based general of the Indian army. Last year, India protested against the Chinese practice of issuing visas to Kashmiris on separate pieces of paper. China reportedly gave no explanation for the move.

China's envoy to India, Zhang Yan, told reporters ahead of Wen's visit: "Relations are very fragile, very easy to damage and very difficult to repair. Therefore they need special care in the information age."

Beijing fears India's deepening ties with the US are a move to contain China, while New Delhi perceives Beijing's increasing influence on Myanmar and Pakistan as a threat to its backyard.

Although both countries plan to increase economic cooperation, the visit made little progress on geopolitical differences over Pakistan, terrorism and disputed border. The Chinese prime minister left for Pakistan for his two-day visit from New Delhi.

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