

GROUND REALITIES

NHRC chief's suggestion

Govt. must respond positively

THE chairman of the National Human Rights Commission would like the home ministry to issue a strong warning against any more deaths in custody. We endorse the statement, for we feel that such a warning will be instrumental in rolling back a malaise which has embarrassed us all in recent years. While we are rather happy that in recent weeks there has been a decline in the number of extra-judicial killings by the security agencies, we still feel that unless a definitive position is taken by the government on a prevention of such deaths, they will recur with little possibility of the bad trend being stamped out in the near future.

For the authorities to adopt the position the NHRC chairman has suggested, there will be quite a few matters that must be cleared up and acknowledged beforehand. The first is that the state has a responsibility to protect the lives and property of citizens. But when citizens lose their lives in the custody of the state, it is quite a hint of what the state could turn into if its security agencies remain unbridled. Every death in custody is a telling comment on the nature of the state. Even one death is one too many and every single death at the hands of the police or RAB is a gross violation of fundamental human rights.

A second point is that the government, which has so far admitted to no extra-judicial killings since it came to office, must step out of this denial mode and acknowledge the reality for what it is. It is unacceptable for ministers to suggest, as the foreign minister did recently, that such killings will take time to be brought to an end. Decisive, swift executive action will lead to instant results.

Let the situation be thought through. Meanwhile, let the RAB operational guidelines be revised, through providing for safeguards for citizens every time the outfit goes into action.

Accidents at level crossings

These are quite avoidable

ACCIDENTS and deaths at railway level crossings have been on the rise of late. The latest being at Narayanganj on Monday morning. The accident was a usual train-truck collision at an 'unauthorised' level crossing, that left 3 dead and 75 hurt. Out of 26 railway crossings on Dhaka-Narayanganj route, 12 are unauthorised. It is beyond our comprehension how a level crossing could remain a casual affair.

That said, the physical conditions of the railway crossings and the way these are operated sound pathetic. Most of these are still not manned adequately and minimally equipped. Both the train on the track and the vehicle on the road were exposed to dangers of fatalities due to poor handling of the gatemen at these level crossings. Add to it, the trading activity alongside the railway tracks.

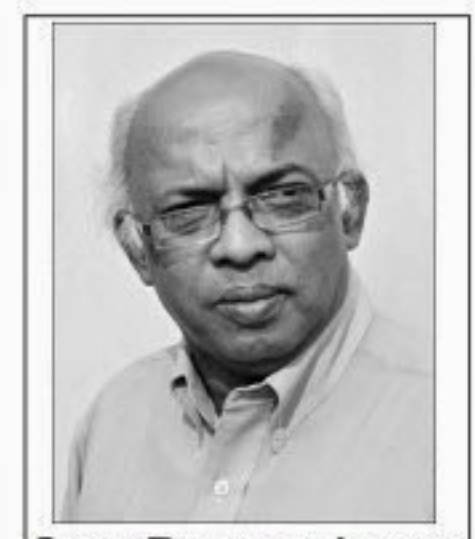
If the capital and its neighbourhood are in such a shape, we wonder how things work in the districts or rural areas. There the railway lines mostly run through crowded markets endangering lives of people.

Negligence of the signalmen and recklessness of the drivers of ill-fated vehicles that get rammed by the oncoming train are principal causes of such tragedies. Most of the time these mindless drivers gatecrash and land up right in front of the moving engines, resulting in deaths of not only the passengers, but also killing some of the hapless onlookers.

Overloading of passengers on the roofs and engines of trains, by a section of corrupt railway employees is also a major cause of such incidents.

It's time authorities took effective measures to stop this menace. Upgrading systems at the crossings, raising awareness among the people, capacity building of the guards including pay incentives and declaring certain area around the railway tracks off limits - could be a few

A brief history of hounding



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ABDUL Monem Khan, determined to prevent Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from emerging into sunlight, always

made sure that every time the Bengali nationalist leader obtained bail in a case, a new case and therefore a new arrest warrant were slapped on him.

The Ayub-loyalist governor of East Pakistan once even made the dire prediction that as long as he held office, Mujib would remain in prison. The prediction went wrong. Bangabandhu was freed under the onslaught of a mass movement in February 1969 when Monem Khan was still governor. And he would be governor till late March, when his benefactor Ayub Khan would throw him out of office as a way of trying to save himself.

The point is simple: hounding people, trying to humiliate eminent individuals, in the end leaves those doing the hounding red-faced with embarrassment. These days when you observe the government of Bangladesh compelling the eminent scholar and academic Serajul Islam Choudhury to seek bail in a case related to the Ariel Beel incident, you begin to wonder why good men must always be hounded by people who ought to have known better.

In Professor Choudhury's instance, the policemen who filed the case against him (and his brothers as well as hundreds of others) simply had no idea of his background. They thought he was a doctor of medicine earning a living through his practice in the village. What do you make of that? And what happens to Choudhury once his four-month bail period is over? Does he, one of the foremost men of letters in Bangladesh today, then quietly walk into prison?

In the mid-1960s, President Charles de Gaulle, asked what action he planned to take against the radical, Nobel-rejecting Jean-Paul Sartre, had a simple response: "One does not arrest Voltaire." But that was then and the man was De Gaulle.

In this country, for a good number of years now, we have had few qualms

about pulling down men and women whose thoughts are more sublime than ours and whose image in the eyes of the world is brighter than ours. If we now have Serajul Islam Choudhury arrested, we will be putting all sophistication and all things of intellectual brilliance in a bind.

Now observe the various ways in which Muhammad Yunus has been

proof of the varied pedestrian ways in which the good and the great are hounded. The mullahs went after him, for he wrote verses and songs they did not understand. And before the Nobel came to him in 1913, Rabindranath Tagore saw his songs ridiculed by men who are today not remembered by history.

A disturbing instance of hounding

Hounding by the state has often led to terrible consequences for the hounded. The Moroccan authorities, under King Hassan II, abducted the outspoken opposition politician Mehdi Ben Barka in Paris in 1965. The man was never seen or heard of again. Stalin hounded Trotsky and would not rest until his agents had the revolutionary murdered in far-

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ART GLAZER

and is being harassed by a government we thought had liberalism as a cornerstone of its being. The prime minister has been scathing in her condemnation of the Nobel laureate in parliament; her government, despite all the worries raised by the international community about the treatment being meted out to Yunus, appears determined to hound him out of Grameen Bank.

As a citizen, you are troubled. Why would you not be if the ghost of Monem Khan keeps coming back in your life? Your sadness takes on added weight when you watch a cheerful Sheikh Hasina inaugurating the Ekushey Book Fair in the company of the eminent Bengali Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, with that other Bengali Nobel laureate, Muhammad Yunus, nowhere in sight. Why must it always come down to this?

Ah, but there is something in the nature of men and women that quite does not rise above the provincial. Kazi Nazrul Islam remains definitive

you can decipher in the torment Taslima Nasreen has gone through over the years. She moves from one country to another in search of shelter, for her own country has shut its doors to her. It is a shame we do not speak of. And so we put ourselves into deeper shame. Humayun Azad was hounded for years by the dark forces of fanaticism. In the end, he did not live. It is our shame.

Men and women with grey matter have suffered the consequences of originality. In 1960, the Soviet regime of Nikita Khrushchev went, in the manner of attack dogs, after Boris Pasternak. The heart-broken writer of Doctor Zhivago had little choice but to repudiate the Nobel awarded to him. In Pakistan, the Ahmadiyya community has been hounded ceaselessly and not even Sir Zafrullah Khan, its first foreign minister, was spared indignity. Fanatics in Bangladesh have employed their own dark mechanism to keep local Ahmadiyyas in a state of siege.

away Mexico. Iran's ayatollahs, for all their professions of religiosity, felt not at all queasy about taking the life of Shahpour Bakhtiar in distant France.

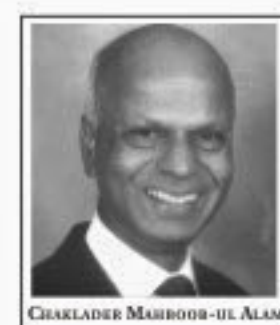
In Bangladesh, Ahmad Sharif was hounded by men whose intellectual competence was symbolised by absolute shallowness. The government of Khaleda Zia cheerfully hounded the academic Muntassir Mamoon and the politician Saber Hossain Chowdhury. Our practice of hounding reached horrendous proportions when the military-backed Fakhruddin Ahmed caretaker administration tried to strip the academics Anwar Hossain, Harun-or-Rashid, Sadrul Amin, Sayeedur Rahman Khan and others of their dignity in blindfolded remand.

One last point: humiliating Serajul Islam Choudhury and Muhammad Yunus demeans all of us. Will someone in government call a halt to all this misplaced activism?

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LETTER FROM EUROPE

Defending Grameen



CHAHARSHAH MAHMOOD

I still remember the day when I met Professor Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank for the first time.

It was, I think, in 1998. He came to give a lecture at the University of Madrid, Spain. The huge conference room of the Medical College, where the event took place under the chairmanship of the queen, was packed to its full capacity.

There were hundreds of students, teachers, journalists and social workers at the meeting. I must confess that I had never seen so much enthusiasm among the students to listen to a banker from a third world country, and they were not disappointed.

Prof. Yunus started by saying: "The reason we have so much poverty in the world is because we have not addressed the issue of poverty right." Then he went on to challenge the basic assumptions of the capitalistic system that credit was a neutral tool, that the entrepreneurs were a small group of especially talented people, and that profit maximisation was the fundamental principle which underpinned the whole system.

He declared in his gentle but firm voice that without social conscience economics could not be considered as a social science. He said that credit created power, therefore, should be made available to the poor as well. In his opinion, given the right opportunity everybody could become an entrepreneur -- a self-employed busi-

nessman.

Then he went on to explain that Grameen was not merely a micro-lending organisation which gave small loans to the poor without collateral. It was much more than that. Achieving economic independence through micro-credit was important but it was not everything. Grameen was a social project -- its central purpose was to restore human dignity to

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the poor.

He felt that there must be a few basic principles like discipline, unity, good spirit and work which should guide a person throughout his or her whole life. Prof. Yunus talked about a sixteen-point code of conduct which was discussed and debated at borrowers' meetings at the village level in the presence of Grameen officials.

Answering a specific question from a female student about the sex and

marital status of the borrowers of the bank, Prof. Yunus said that over 90% of them were married women -- often with young children. In my opinion, this in itself it was a huge achievement, particularly so in a predominantly Muslim country. Needless to say, this reply was greeted with a thunderous applause from the audience which was dominated by female students.

Many years have gone by after that meeting, but I remain convinced that all this taken together was and still is the Grameen concept -- Grameen is not a charity, not a government-run institution, not a profit-maximising organisation, it is a social project run with the help of capitalistic tools. Grameen is largely owned by its customers. It is also a non-profit organisation because every year its profits are given back to its borrowers in the form of dividends who maintain savings accounts with the bank. It is indeed a noble as well as a novel concept.

The problems start when there are deviations from the original concept, and in my opinion most of the recent criticisms levelled against micro-credit in general and Grameen in particular are due to the fact that the critics have ignored this basic prerequisite for a proper analysis of the situation.

It is unfortunate that the terms micro-credit and Grameen have been misappropriated or hijacked by unscrupulous for-profit commercial organisations in India, Mexico,

Nicaragua, Bolivia, and some other developing countries. The principal objectives of these commercial organisations have been fast growth and profit-maximisation by hook or by crook. In the process they have brought the system itself into great disrepute.

These are serious deviations from the original Grameen concept. But Prof. Yunus can hardly be blamed or held responsible for the activities of these loan sharks who are not really interested in helping the poor to get out of their poverty.

The government of Bangladesh has started a wide-ranging inquiry into the activities of Grameen Bank. What is the motivation behind this inquiry?

There have been accusations that micro-credit was "sucking blood out of the poor." Do we have any evidence to support such a serious accusation? In any case, if that is true, what have the micro-credit regulatory authorities of Bangladesh been doing all these years?

Whether one likes it or not Grameen Bank "has become an indispensable part of Bangladeshi social and economic fabric." It is an enormously successful social project whose future is of great importance to millions of Bangladeshis. Everything should be done to ensure its independence and good governance. In my opinion, time has come for Prof. Muhammad Yunus to think of a capable successor who will be able to continue with his good work.

The writer is a columnist for the Daily Star.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 2

1807

The U.S. Congress passes an act to "prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States... from any foreign kingdom, place, or country."

1815

Signing of the Kandyan Convention treaty by British invaders and the King of Sri Lanka.

1877

Just two days before inauguration, the U.S. Congress declares Rutherford B. Hayes the winner of the election even though Samuel J. Tilden had won the popular vote on November 7, 1876.

1971

Bangabandhu demands an enquiry into the killing of Banalis by the Pakistan Army. He also declares that Hartal will be observed everyday. Students of Dhaka University raise the Bangladesh Flag for the first time.

1989

Twelve European Community nations agree to ban the production of all chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) by the end of the century.

1990

Nelson Mandela is elected deputy President of the African National Congress.