

SHIFTING IMAGES

# Compulsive buyer or chronic "returner"?



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**I**S there any particular reason for the return Ma'am?" I heard the salesman ask. Turning around I noticed a young woman at the cash register with a bag full of clothes she wished to return. This is not an unusual sight in a store in America - everyday people bring back merchandise that they want to exchange or return. However, what struck me was the insouciance with which the woman shrugged her shoulders and responded: "I've changed my mind -- don't want them any more." The sales representative patiently scanned the item tags, punched the required information in the register, and the transaction was completed in less than five minutes!

The incident reminded me of a recent dinner where I overheard two ladies exchanging notes on how simple it was to return purchases in the United States. They poked fun at the naiveté of American chain stores where no one checked to see if items brought back were damaged or soiled. According to these ladies, even worn dresses could be

returned with impunity! One of them proudly declared that she spent her Saturdays buying stuff that were on sale or were exceptional bargains, while on Sundays she sorted out what was really needed and returned the unwanted stuff. "It's easier to sieve through everything at home where I am not distracted by other customers or by too many choices!" she proclaimed with a great degree of confidence.

Somewhat puzzled at the conversation, I asked why, in the first instance, it was necessary to buy things that one didn't really need. The response was direct and unabashed: "It's the pleasure of buying -- one really gets a kick out of it, especially if one is feeling low. It can be therapeutic." I remember reading an article which claimed that shopping stimulates the same part of the brain as chocolate or sex! Whether this is true or not, many consider the entire process of shopping, exchanging and returning items the best way to relieve boredom or, sometimes, even depression. However, the problem is that, by boasting about their adventurous and somewhat dubious "return" experiences, the chronic "returners" unwittingly perpetuate these unsavoury practices! I wonder, what is it about shopping that makes one's adrenaline flow? Is it

simply the process of making a choice, or the act of buying, or just the thrill of a new acquisition? From what I have observed, there are three broad types of shoppers: (i) The addicted buyers, also known as "shopaholics," who visit a store and have to buy something because it helps fill up a void or provides them with a sense of power and control. They are also the chronic "return-

ers." If you happen to be near a cash counter in a shopping mall in the US, you are bound to spot them. They are adept at making the right arguments for returning their wares. Sometimes they even manage to purchase back what they return -- and that, too, at bargain prices! (ii) In the second category are shoppers who buy to fulfill a determined need. These individuals make occasional trips to a shopping center for the purpose of targeted buying. (iii) Finally, we have people who mostly

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buy essential items but also splurge once in a while. These "social shoppers" go out with friends, enjoy a lunch and end up buying something that they like but may not necessarily need.

It is worth flipping the coin to examine the phenomena from the seller's perspective. Why do the stores offer "sweetheart" deals to customers? Is it because they feel

The salesman accepted the shirt back and promptly made a cash refund. After a few days the shopper discovered the receipt at home. To his great embarrassment he realised that he had returned the apparel to the wrong store. The shirt was purchased at some other shop!

Of course, the fundamental question that comes to mind is why did the salesman take the merchandise back without a receipt? The most obvious answer is: to promote good public relations so that the buyer spreads the word around about the store's great return policy and super customer service. This way the shop gets free publicity and attracts more customers.

There is, however, a more sublime rationale underpinning the "open-ended return policy" for consumer items in this country. The United States is essentially a trust-based society where most transactions are made on the premise that people speak the truth unless it's proved that they are lying. We see this principle applied everywhere: in job interviews where a person is seldom required to produce original certificates; in filing tax returns where, in most cases, you don't have to provide supporting documents for statements/claims; in purchasing goods or services over the phone where there is no need to show

physical evidence of any kind. Most statements are accepted at face value because people have faith in what is known as the "honour system."

Unfortunately, due to the unethical practices of a few, confidence in the integrity of the ordinary customer is fast eroding and some retailers are introducing more stringent screening standards, which is why it's worrisome to hear folks poking fun at the so-called "stupidity" of the stores that are duped into taking back "even soiled/worn merchandise!"

It's worrisome because we don't want to destroy the trust that has been invested in us, the common consumers, since it empowers us in many ways. Whatever happens, we don't want the follies of the 10%, who are inclined to take undue advantage of the system, to make a dent in the trust-base that the rest of the 90% are working hard to sustain! So, next time you come across compulsive buyers and chronic returners , please ask them to find a more worthwhile pastime than flitting from store to store. Or, suggest that they call "shopaholics anonymous" for professional counseling!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

## International Day for UN Peacekeepers

ILYAS IFTEKHAR RASUL

**S**INCE 2003, United Nations (UN) has been observing "International Day for UN Peacekeepers" on May 29 every year. The purpose of this day is two-fold; one, to honour the memory of UN peacekeepers who lost their lives in the cause of peace; two, to pay tribute to all men and women who have served and continue to serve in the UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) for their high level of professionalism, dedication and courage.

Bangladesh, as an active member of the UN and as a top Troops Contributing Country (TCC), also observes the day in a most befitting manner expressing solidarity with UN activities and programmes. What does this day mean to UN vis-à-vis Bangladesh? What lessons can we draw from it?

The responsibility of maintaining world peace and security is enshrined in the UN Charter. Peacekeeping, although not explicitly mentioned in the Charter, has evolved over the years as one of the main tools to achieve this goal. The UNPKO have traditionally been associated with Chapter VI of the Charter (former Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld referred to it as Chapter Six and a Half) and gradually extended to Chapter VII and Chapter VIII of the Charter.

The UNPKO commenced with the deployment of Blue Berets in the Middle East in 1948 to monitor the Armistice Agreement in Palestine. Since then, a total of 64 missions have been launched across the globe. At present, 15 operations are directed and supported by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) with 1,22,948 peacekeepers, including 99,133 uniformed personnel and 19,449 civilian personnel, from 115 countries.

The estimated expenditure of UNPKO from 1948 to June 30, 2010, was about \$69 billion, and the current year's budget is \$7.83 billion. A total of 2,900 peacekeepers including 103 from Bangladesh, sacrificed their lives in various UN peace operations (as of April 30, 2011: www.un.org). In 1988, UN peacekeepers were awarded Nobel Peace Prize for their significant contribution to the cause of peace.

Over the years, UN peacekeep-

ing has evolved to meet the demands of various conflicts and a changing political landscape. UN peacekeeping has earned the credibility of providing security and support to millions of people and fragile institutions emerging from conflicts. UN peacekeepers are deployed to war-torn regions with the mandate of the Security Council. However, it has always been recognised that peacekeeping support is a process, it cannot resolve the problem alone.

UN peacekeeping was originally developed as a means of dealing

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with inter-state conflicts. Gradually, it has been increasingly applied to intra-state conflicts and civil wars. In this transformation, with the military remaining the backbone of most peacekeeping operations, a host of the new and complementary actors like administrators, police officers, election observers, human rights monitors, humanitarian workers, etc. have been integrated to make those multidimensional and complex.

UN peacekeeping continues to evolve, both conceptually and operationally, to meet the new challenges and political realities, which are unprecedented in scale, complexity and risk level.

Despite the remarkable success of UNPKO, there have been some setbacks also. In the initial 40 years (Cold War period), only 13 UN missions were deployed, but following the end of the Cold War 20 missions were launched within 5 years. However, by late '90s, due to setbacks in missions like Somalia, Rwanda, etc., deployment declined --causing a lull in UN peacekeeping. However, it paved the way for regrouping following the Brahimi Panel Report, and the UN's role and scale of deployment have been increasing from early 2000.

During this resurgence, we saw a gradual shift from the traditional

role of maintaining ceasefires to peace enforcement through the application of Chapter VII, partnership with regional bodies, integrated roles of other non-state actors, etc. There also had been a gradual but tremendous increase in the civilian and police dimensions of UN peacekeeping. Of late, UN preference has also been noticed for Hybrid Forces with the predominance of regional forces. To help to build sustainable peace, a Peace Building Commission (PBC) was formed in 2007.

Initially, the developed countries

led the UN force deployment, but since the '80s, there has been a decline in their troop contribution -- barring the missions in the Middle East. Since then, contribution of developing nations increased with the predominance of South Asian nations, including Bangladesh. The number of TCCs has also increased considerably (from 34 in 1965 to 115 in 2011), displaying its importance and acceptability. UN peacekeeping has been most responsive to conflicts in Europe, Latin America and Africa but least responsive in Asia.

Bangladesh, as a top TCC, has participated since 1988 in 46 UN peacekeeping missions in 32 countries with approximately 1,00,000 uniformed personnel. Currently, 10,621 personnel are deployed in 11 missions (in 10 countries), mostly in Africa -- ranking top amongst TCCs (as of May 26, 2011).

Though Bangladesh entered UNPKO from the Second Generation of UN Peacekeeping (1988), she has proved to be an invaluable partner to the UN. Bangladesh troops went through many critical situations in many missions where they held the UN flag high and steadfast -- like in Cambodia, Somalia, DRC, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire, Liberia and Sudan. Bangladesh's commitment

to global peace has not been without a price. 103 of her brave peacekeepers died and 116 were wounded in maintaining world peace far away from home. On this auspicious day, the country salutes them and remembers their valour and sacrifice.

UNPKO has provided Bangladesh forces a unique opportunity to work in environments that are evolving, complex and multidimensional, and undertake military, quasi-military and civic actions. It has also facilitated them to gain immense experience and exposure to conflict management, modern weapons and equipment, international operating procedures, command and control system, etc. Their experiences and best practices in various national development activities, disaster management, and counter-insurgency operations have also positively contributed to UNPKO. The factors that contributed to their wide acceptability and credibility include their professionalism, discipline, neutrality, compliance of mission mandate, cordial relations with host populations, etc.

Peacekeeping operations demand multidimensional approach. Hence, our forces need to constantly revise and update policies and practices in order to maintain their meaningful presence and lead role in future UNPKO. Back home, there should be a continuous institutional study and research on the evolving policies and best practices of UN peacekeeping at all levels, i.e. tactical, operational and strategic. Our forces should be more conversant with local languages, especially French and Arabic for the missions in French and Arabic speaking countries.

As top TCC, Bangladesh must vigorously pursue proportionate representation in leadership positions and thus ensure implementation of its Resolution (Paragraph 215 of General Assembly Resolution A/61/19 Part II dated 5 June 2007), which emphasises this issue. Bangladesh representation in the civil dimension of peacekeeping is far less than it is in uniformed representation.

The writer was Military Adviser to the Bangladesh Permanent Mission to the UN.

## Child drowning in Bangladesh

AMINUR RAHMAN and TOM MECROW

**T**HE weather is already warming up as Bangladeshis start preparing for a long, sweltering summer. Before we know it, the rains will begin and the rivers, dams, drains and ditches across the country will start filling up with water and eventually the country will experience the annual floods.

This is the perfect time to take a minute to stop and think about the very real dangers of children around water.

Rowshon Ara is a mother of three children in North Kochikata, Manohardi. One day, that started like all the rest, she went to prepare some food for her 18 month old son Rajon. She left her son for no longer than 10 minutes, and on her return he had disappeared.

Tragically, locals found his body in a pond just 50 metres from their house. This happened five years ago and even now, every single day, Rowshon lives with the pain of losing her young son in such a preventable accident.

This is an all too common story in Bangladesh.

Drowning is the leading cause of death in children aged 1-17 years in Bangladesh. On average, 50 children drown a day in this country, claiming 18,000 young lives every year. This startling statistic is enough to shock any health worker, parent or politician, but it's very real and it's happening every day. This is a public health issue and needs to be addressed immediately.

Given that the majority of the Bangladeshi population lives in rural areas, it's no surprise that most of drowning deaths take place there. There is an abundance of ponds and rivers that will soon swell, and can prove deadly if a child wanders near one, falls in and finds himself in trouble. Research from the most recent Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey shows that the main reason young children drown is a lack of supervision.

But it's not just rural children who are victims of drowning. It's common for families who live in Dhaka or Chittagong to head to the beautiful beaches of Cox's Bazar or St. Martin's Island. It's also unfortunately all too common for children to rush into the water in excitement without knowing how to swim or how to survive if they get in trouble.

Few will know that significant world leading research is currently taking place in Bangladesh to understand the epidemiology of the epidemic, and to develop effective interventions. The national SwimSafe programme has taught over 100,000 Bangladeshi children how to swim in an effort to understand the relationship between swimming ability and drowning. Furthermore, research is currently being undertaken on the effectiveness of developing a volunteer-based first responder network for First Aid and CPR. Interestingly, this will be the first time the effectiveness of CPR has been tested in a developing country.

The International Drowning Research Centre Bangladesh (IDRC-B), the only research centre of its kind in the world, is based in Dhaka because of the extent of the problem and was established with international partners Royal Life Saving Society Australia, The Alliance for Safe Children and AusAID.

The IDRC-B had a strong presence at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention that was recently held in Vietnam. The gathering was the first time the world's leading researchers, policy makers, lifesavers and NGO workers in the drowning prevention sector came together to discuss the global issue, and Bangladesh had the unique opportunity to share the groundbreaking steps being undertaking to reduce child drowning not just in our own country, but across Asia and other developing countries.

New evidence presented at the conference by IDRC-B and its partners showed that the 300,000 deaths by drowning across Asia each year could be dramatically reduced by as much as 85% with the effective implementation of the unique interventions developed in Bangladesh.

We can all do something to prevent this national epidemic. It starts with the basics -- ensure that children are under constant supervision near water. Enrol your child in swimming lessons to provide them with the skills to survive in water. Learn basic first aid so you know what to do if someone needs medical assistance.

Child drowning is something we can all prevent -- so let's stop these tragic, unnecessary deaths.

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