

CROSS TALK

Migrant workers' recruitment and return

Degrading treatment must end

THE turmoil in the Middle East, apart from the regular difficulties faced by our workers in the region in normal times, has brought home to us the realisation that measures are needed to ensure the safety of those we send abroad for employment as migrant workers. Such a need has been highlighted yet once again, this time through a round table on the theme of responsible recruitment and responsible return of migrant workers. Given the trauma Bangladeshi workers have faced owing to the crisis in Libya, the time is here for measures that will ensure the security of not just our migrant workers but also those of other nations.

In a world increasingly sensitised to human rights, internationally accepted norms of behaviour must come into how employers as well as employing countries treat migrant workers. All too often recruiting agencies in the home country and employing firms abroad wash their hands of the workers once the latter have been put on flights to their destinations. What happens to these workers in most instances is horrific. Often they are dumped with jobs they did not want, with wages and management behaviour being of an appallingly low standard. Employers in many cases seize the passports of the foreign workers, thus compelling them into a hostage-like situation. The climax of such reprehensible behaviour is reached when during moments of crisis, such as the Libyan situation, there is no institution migrant workers can turn to in order to ensure their safety and eventual return home. Ethics goes missing where employers' behaviour is concerned.

There is a responsibility here for the state as well as brand groups and recruiting agencies. Unless workers are guaranteed rights to decent wages and good management behaviour abroad and safe return home, they must not be pushed into going overseas. Necessary pressure must be put on employing firms abroad and their governments, especially in the Middle East, on a guarantee of civilised behaviour toward migrant workers. The wide gap between recruitment of migrant workers and accepted global norms will have to be bridged if our workers are not to continue being subjected to degrading treatment abroad.

Plight of accident victims

They need compensation

VICTIMS of road, railway or waterway accidents often go unnoticed either by the government or the private sector. Exceptions occur only when head of the government or a minister announces any compensation for the victims on humanitarian grounds. There is no adequate statutory provision to redress the victims of transport-related accidents

A human story on the suffering of a railway accident victim carried by this paper on Thursday has brought the issue to a sharper focus. The victim, a young vendor cosmetic products named Sharif, who boarded the ill-fated Dhaka-bound train from Bhairab on December 08 last year, is still waiting for compensation, from the Bangladesh Railway (BR). Unfortunately, the boy, who lost both his legs in the accident, had to attend a BR-arranged medical board in Chittagong at his own cost.

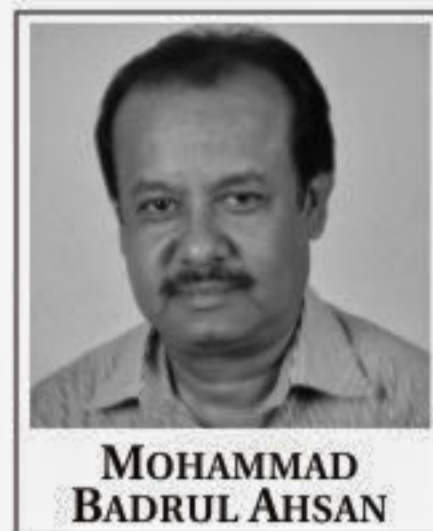
Even after six months that the railway crash had taken place and two months since he faced the medical board, he is still in the dark if he would get the paltry sum of Tk 10,000 as compensation from the BR. Oddly though, the provision of BR's compensation was enacted in 1890 during colonial rule. Obviously, no government that came into office in between had ever thought of replacing the old provision with one that befits the time. Perhaps, the picture is more or less the same in the cases of accidents on the roads or waterways.

In the circumstances, the government needs to take the issue of statutory provision for accident victims related to transport with due seriousness and create fresh provisions as necessary.

Simultaneously, we hope the BR, the government for that matter, would amply compensate Sharif as well as 21 other victims of December 8, 2010's railway mishap on the Bhairab-Dhaka route.

The private sector transport owners should also be

Match fixing in our politics



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

GOOD news and bad news, our leaders are thinking ahead of them. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Jatiya Party chairman Hussein Muhammad Ershad had a huddle last week, and it was just between two of them. Good news is they talked about the future. Bad news is their discussion apparently had a morbid resonance from the morbid past. For those who care, the upshot is loud and clear. Our politics is not going to get past its past.

Between them the two leaders mapped out the future terrain of national politics. They talked about how to save our distressed democracy since BNP is behaving like a stick in the mud. Ershad assured his ally-in-chief that Jatiya Party would be ready to make the sacrifice. It will independently contest in the next election, if that is what it must do to save democracy's conjugal vow. Man and woman are incomplete without each other. In a democracy, the ruling party without its opposition is just about the same.

That amounts to match fixing in politics, if that has never crossed anyone's mind. Match fixing occurs when a match is played to a completely or partially pre-determined result. And what kind of democracy allows the ruling party to pick its own opposition? Ideally, it should be the people, who should get to make that choice every five years.

BNP ignored that cardinal principle of democracy couple of times in the past. In 1996, it went to polls without Awami League and formed a government that lasted for a couple of weeks. Then in 2006 it went about another trick. It hoped to win the parliamentary elections through a caretaker government stacked with its own favorites. Both times it backfired, which is why BNP has been reduced to its skeletal presence in the national parliament.

What that means is that the people

of this country do not like it when others wish to do their job. Last week when the leaders looked into the future, they must have been heady with the same political pheromones that influenced BNP in the past. They talked out and chalked out a plan to perpetuate power, oblivious that it amounted to doing the same silly thing that has caused the undoing of their rival.

In itself it could not be so bad because politicians always like to win elections at any cost. They make pledges to the electorate. They try to manipulate elections. They threaten the voters, buy them out or even resort to hijacking ballot boxes as a sort of last resort.

That is perhaps the inherent weakness of imitation democracy, when form takes over substance. In the government of the people, by the people and for the people, politicians in an ersatz democracy tend to turn the game into a confidence trick. They spend more time weaning people off their political will than winning it. It was for this reason that our politicians can sit down to decide that if a third party does not participate in the election, they would split people's verdict between them.

In all fairness, democracy is supposed to be a government in which all citizens have an equal say. And bear me out if I say that the problem of our politics simply lies in one single contradiction. Not only do some people say more than others, but also popular governments show disdain for what people have to say. It is probably why people have set in motion the alternate cycle of electoral vengeance. A political party that wins by landslide also loses by landslide in the next election.

Last week, two leading leaders of this country talked about the future, and it should have inspired hope amongst us only if they were not talking in the past tense. It was at once bizarre and brazen. Bizarre because they showed the strains of recidivism, relapsing to the same old trick that has got our politics to its present



VICKI WEHRMAN

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mess. Brazen because those leaders actually believed they had the proprietary right over public opinion and people were at their beck and call.

It's sad, also a shame, that our politicians are still lusting for power even in their sunset days. Two-time prime ministers still hanker after a third term. A former dictator, who ruled this country for the longest stretch, is a contender for the next leader of the opposition. One may not be able to step in the same river twice, but our politi-

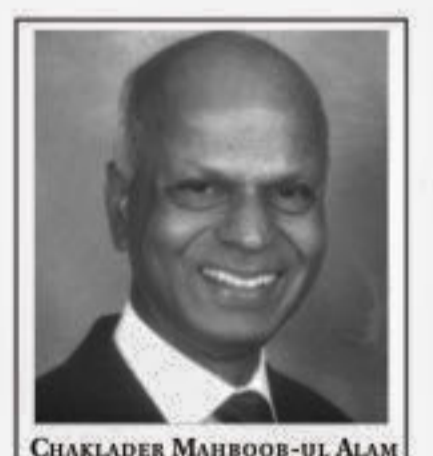
cians hope to do it again and again.

An earnest plea to all politicians, who have crossed sixty. Your only choice is to think ahead of you, because the past is already sealed. No matter how many elections you win, you will be remembered for your legacy only. One game that can't be fixed unless people are thoroughly convinced.

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LETTER FROM EUROPE

Greek debt crisis: Bold action required



CHARALAMBOS MAIROUDOU-EL ALAM

AFTER a meeting lasting more than seven hours, Europe's finance ministers failed to reach an agreement over the release of 12 billion euros of urgent aid to Greece. Instead, under mounting pressure from the IMF on the EU to guarantee Greece's finances for the next year, the politicians opted to delay the decision until July 3. By then the Greek Parliament is expected to approve a second round of tough austerity measures as demanded by the lenders.

This, I am afraid, is not the end of the Greek tragedy. Since it can not return to the financial markets in the foreseeable future because of its huge debt burden (over 150% of GDP), it has no choice but to depend on a second bailout package of 85 billion euros (first bailout package was worth 110 billion euros) from the international lenders including the IMF or enter into a situation of uncontrolled default opening up the possibility of spreading the contagion to other countries.

Meanwhile, Greece's economy is shrinking at an alarming rate. Its gross domestic product fell at a rate of 5.5% in the first quarter of this year. The second round of austerity measures demanded by the European Union will impose more hardship on the population. With falling domestic

demand and a lower tax base, it is difficult to see how these measures would help the Greek government to start reducing its debt burden (principal and full interest). Since it can not devalue its currency because it gave up the drachma to join the euro, it has absolutely no chance of reviving its export industry.

I am well aware of the constraints placed on the European politicians by their electorates back home, but it is absolutely vital for them to rise above their electoral interests and take bold decisions now. In order to do that, they must, first of all, accept some unpleasant facts. They must stop pretending that it is simply a Greek problem. They must accept the fact that this is a problem that affects the whole of the euro area and try to tackle it as such. The motto, in European capitals, should be, "We sink or swim together". Some analysts have even gone so far as to suggest

that the stability of the global financial system depends on the stability of the euro-area financial system.

Actually, Greece should not have been allowed to join the euro in 2001 on falsified figures. If the EU had a European finance ministry, it would have discovered earlier that year after year, Greece had kept on fiddling its books and borrowing vast sums money on the basis of those falsified figures. The lenders (mostly German and French banks) share part of the responsibility because they did not bother to check the figures provided by the Greek government and ignored the risks they were undertaking. In fact, the Germans, the French and the Dutch were quite happy to ignore these facts

because they were making huge gains in the export market because of the weak euro.

European politicians must stop blaming each other. They should concentrate on the future. Past is past,

no one can change it but they still have an opportunity to change the future. Mistakes were made in the past. Continuous bickering and denial won't make the problem go away. They, including the Germans, the French, and the Dutch etc. should realize that if the euro collapses, their financial system, most probably, would also collapse. So what should be done to avoid such a collapse?

I know it is hard to swallow such a drastic measure as to allow Greece to restructure its debt "extending payouts and reducing the principal". But the fact is Greece is simply not in a position to honour its commitments. Therefore there is no other way but to adopt a policy of writing down debts, deferring payments and reducing interest rates. I know some experts would technically call it a default, but given the circumstances, it is better to have an orderly default than to have disorderly one.

The euro member countries should set up a European finance ministry "to supervise spending by all countries using the euro" in the future.

Finally, I would urge the euro member countries to streamline the unification process and work towards having a set of common fiscal and labour laws for the euro-area as a whole. It will always be very difficult to sustain a simple monetary union on its own without a common framework for other related matters.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 1

- 1908**
SOS is adopted as the international distress signal.
- 1921**
The Communist Party of China is founded.
- 1960**
Independence of Somalia.
- 1970**
President General Yahya Khan abolishes One-Unit of West Pakistan restoring the provinces.
- 1994**
Yasser Arafat ends 27-year exile. The chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Yasser Arafat, returns to the Gaza Strip after 27 years in exile.
- 1997**
The People's Republic of China resumes sovereignty over the city-state of Hong Kong, ending 156 years of British colonial rule.