

INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS A THREAT TO JUSTICE EVERYWHERE

Abu Taher and the Supreme Court of Bangladesh
(PART-2)

LAWRENCE LIFSHULTZ

ON this day of remembrance in honour of Abu Taher, the words of a great American kept entering my thoughts. I had the privilege of growing up as a young man, while Martin Luther King was still alive.

I kept thinking of the words Martin Luther King wrote in April 1963 in his Birmingham prison cell: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

In my view, what Martin Luther King said then directs us now down a hidden road of Bangladesh's history which, like Taher's case, requires the remedy of accountability and justice. Fifteen months after Taher was executed a great storm of death tore through the prisons of this country.

Before the Supreme Court verdict I presented testimony to the Court on March 14th. In January I had sent in an Affidavit when it seemed that I would not be able to come to Dhaka to testify. In that Affidavit I reported how General Mohamed Manzur, former Chief of General Staff, and someone I had known for several years, informed me that he knew definitively that General Ziaur

Rahman had taken a decision to execute Taher well before Special Tribunal No. 1 began its deadly process in Dhaka Central Jail.

Thus, in light of this information it was clear the proceeding of the Tribunal from the outset were merely a process to set up an execution that General Zia had already decided would take place. I later confirmed Manzur's report with two other military sources that had been close to Zia during this period.

Following the submission of my Affidavit and my testimony, several BNP leaders publicly attacked me, claiming that I had been hired by the government to denigrate General Zia. I had not uttered a word of criticism of the BNP. According to a report in The Daily Star: "A BNP standing committee member, M.K. Anwar, alleged that the government had hired a foreign journalist (Lifschultz) to assassinate the character of [the] late Ziaur Rahman." A few days after this report was published, I telephoned M. K. Anwar and spoke with him.

I said I was a journalist and I wanted to interview him about his evidence that a

foreign journalist had been hired by the current government to disparage General Zia. I said that I was interested in his evidence and his facts. I was then still in Dhaka and asked him for an appointment. He refused to give me one.

I then asked him if could he tell me over the phone what his facts were. I suggested we could do a telephone interview. I could even record it so the record would be clear. Mr. Anwar refused to tell me what evidence he had that I had been "hired." I said this was a very important allegation and we should get to the bottom of it. He refused to continue the conversation or agree to meet me. He hung up the phone.

About ten minutes later Mr. Anwar called me back. I said I was very pleased to hear from him and hoped that he had changed his mind and had agreed to an interview. However, this was not the reason for the call. Clearly, having spoken to an attorney in the intervening ten minutes, Mr. Anwar said he wanted to make clear that when he made his allegation about a certain foreign journalist having been "hired" by the government, he hadn't actu-

ally mentioned any name. Even if The Daily Star on March 16th had indicated that M. K. Anwar in his March 15th press conference was talking about "Lifschultz," Anwar claimed to me he had not named anyone specifically.

I asked Mr. Anwar if it was simply coincidental that I had testified before the Supreme Court, the day before (the 14th), and the very next day he claimed some unnamed journalist had been hired by the government.

I asked Mr. Anwar, if it wasn't Lifschultz, who was he talking about? I said I would be very interested in investigating the possibility that the government had been paying foreign journalists. If he was now unwilling to say I was the culprit, then perhaps he would be good enough to identify the person he was talking about. Yet again he wouldn't tell me. He merely repeated several times: "I didn't mention anyone's name."

However, the BNP Senior Joint Secretary General of the BNP, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, was not so coy. He alleged that I was seeking to "disgrace" General Zia. He used my name in this allegation. I have

written to Mr. Alamgir and asked him for an interview where he would be willing to discuss his earlier comments in greater detail. I hope Mr. Alamgir will meet me and discuss his allegations "on the record." In this respect I hope he will have more courage than Mr. Anwar.

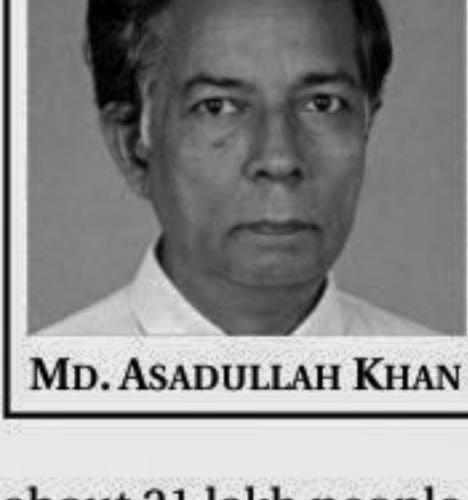
Unlike Mr. Alamgir or Mr. Anwar, I am not in the business of "disinformation." I am in the business of "information." This includes finding out facts that sometimes are not known to the general public. It is a profession called journalism.

I have not personally denigrated General Ziaur Rahman. The real question is whether an investigation of the facts and past events have revealed aspects about General Zia which may be disturbing and possibly reflect unlawful activity. If General Zia committed crimes while he was in power, it is not "the reporter" who reports "the facts" that denigrates the man. It is the man himself, and his own actions that are to be held to account and assessed by the public.

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BITTER TRUTH

Dilemma of middle and poor classes



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

AT a time when the price hike of food items and essential commodities has hit all classes of people, the fixed income groups -- including those without work, retired employees of either government or non-government organisations or employees of private firms, mills and factories -- find themselves in a bind.

The National Pay Commission award in 2009, recommending pay hike, reached only

about 21 lakh people belonging to government and autonomous bodies, but the effect of pay hike, or rather the money gushing out of a small group of beneficiaries' pockets, has affected the vast multitude of people.

Sadly true, the economy of the country is in recession. As a consequence of the closure of the mills and factories due to various reasons, joblessness has surged up. An ominous addition is that, hard hit by the job cut in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Libya and other Middle East countries due to political turmoil, thousands of workers are returning home.

Other than in garment factories, which employ about 30 lakh youth, the employment situation in the country is very bleak. There is no mistaking the fact that buildings and superstructures that are sprawling in the cities and towns and even in the remotest villages do not actually reflect the oft-vaunted economic boom. Although the wealthy are doing somewhat better, most middle-class families feel squeezed.

In the face of the grim fact that our currency depreciates against the dollar everyday, the prices of essential commodities, which are mostly imported from abroad, are spiraling.

With prices of food stuff and daily essentials soaring every day, Abdur Rahim, a retired government employee, with four members in the family dependent on him, faces a grueling battle with his small monthly pension and pension benefit he has put in a bank. He is worried about the cut in the bank rate as a part of the government fiscal policy reforms. "The cut in interest rate may or may not help the Bangladesh economy to reach new milestones in productivity and growth but it has certainly impoverished me, when the prices are rising," he laments.

Mahmud Ali, who retired from sector corporation service, is in a similar bind. Years ago, he invested his entire retirement benefits in the national savings scheme at an annual interest rate of 13%. After the scheme matured, he had to invest his fund at a much lower rate (10.5%) prevalent at that time. "At a time when the prices are rising steadily every day, my monthly income is falling," he says. What will he do if he or any member of his family becomes seriously ill?

Lamentably, the country has no healthcare system to take care of the people who served the government, nay the country, with competence, commitment, dedication and integrity while in service. These people, with no means to bridge the shortfall in their earning, are now in a desperate situation.

Unlike Abdur Rahim and Mahmud Ali, Abdul Kadir has the qualifications and ability to study different savings options, but he won't

do that because of inertia. "I don't have the inclination to continuously look for newer and complicated saving options," he says.

After the shocking stock market crash in 1996 and then in 2010 nobody has any desire to go into that business.

Falling interest rates are only one cause of growing despondency in middle-class savers. A bigger but less expressed cause of worry is the shrinking of saving options. Because of skyrocketing prices, real estate and gold have ceased to be tools of investment for poorer sections. More than 90% of the middle-class people have neither the know-how nor faith in the financial institutions in the country.

It is true that, in the new global economy, savings in financial assets (deposits, bonds, mutual funds and stocks) are more productive than in physical assets (property and gold), but in Bangladesh looters and scamsters with tempting offers of fake business are there to exterminate you.

What is most worrisome is that financial instruments that replaced physical models of savings in the last decade have lost their lustre. Returns are also falling in tax-saving schemes. So, in effect,

part of the uncertainty in the saving community stems from the fear of the failure of the financial institutions.

Inflation, that now hovers over 8.5%, is an indirect tax and hurts the poor the most. It erodes savings, and keeps interest rate high. On the other hand, job creation remains a grand idea and illusion only. Despite the fact that funds were made available in many projects like health, education and agriculture, and most prominently in power sector in the last two and a half years, the agencies concerned could not utilise these allocations.

That means that the country has seen little growth during the last two years. Caught in the unending battle between price hike of daily essentials and meagre resources like fixed earnings, lack of risk-free options for investment, and dwindling earning

from saving schemes the middle-class, not to speak of the poor, are getting not only squeezed but also ruined.

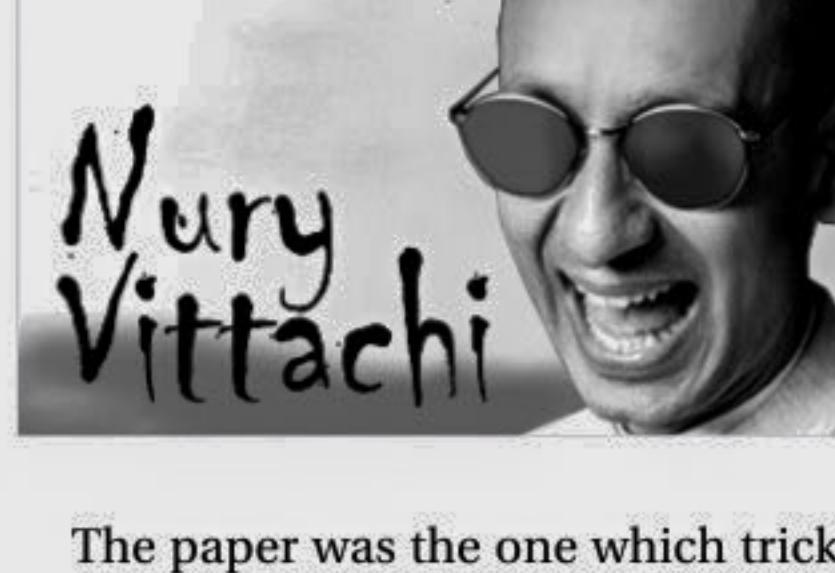
The trend towards inequality is rife with the potential for social conflict, not just between classes but also within the middle and poorer classes. The daily occurrence of murder, extortion, hijacking and dowry deaths are ample evidence of the simmering conflict in the country. This growing inequality could even threaten those who benefit from it by putting an end to the economic expansion that the nation envisions. This signals a great depression that the nation can't head-off even with the best of rhetoric, or the astute and pragmatic planning done within the four walls of the cozy government buildings.

The saddest part is that life is simply getting harder for the middle-class. Not that the middle-class ever lived very well, but most could afford the basics. Today, the soaring prices and the diminishing value of the taka have eroded even the minimum standard of life. The danger is that growing disparities in wealth and living standard will undermine the sense of community and optimism that have kept the country from being riven by class resentments.



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Inside scoop: Murdoch's news



MURDOCH Vittachi good old days Exclusive: This is what was like to work for the News of the World

AT LAST IT CAN BE TOLD. As regular readers know, this columnist once worked for the News of the World, a weekly Rupert Murdoch newspaper whose reporters specialised in breaking laws and tricking stupid people.

A typical morning at the News of the World.
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newsroom
I enter the room at the crack of dawn (which was about 11.45 am), and greet my bosses.

"Good morning, esteemed senior newshounds." The editor looks up and smirks at his youngest junior reporter. "Not very good morning for you, little Asian guy, was it? Heh heh heh heh." Me: "What do you mean?"

Editor: "Had a massive row with your girlfriend, didn't you?" Me: "How did you know that?"

Editor: "Lucky guess." Me: "Yeah, well, these things happen. We'll get over it."

Editor: "That's what you think. She just phoned her mom and is planning to move back in with her parents. Better give her a call."

I notice the message light is blinking on my phone. "Wait. I've got three messages. One must be from her."

Editor: "Nope. One's a telesales marketer, one's from your mom and the other is a wrong number. I'm just guessing, of course."

newsroom2
Suddenly the editor picks up his own phone. After listening for half a minute, he sits down and turns to his keyboard.

"Look busy lads, the big boss is about to arrive and he's in a foul temper."

I look around. "Mr. Murdoch? Where?"

Editor: "He's in his lime downstairs, but his ex-wife's lawyer just called his mobile about alimony payments."

The door opens and a man enters. But it is not Mr. Murdoch. It is Detective Inspector Gibbs, head of the Data Theft Bureau.

Gibbs: "You folk are under arrest for hacking into people's phones and lying and cheating in numerous ways."

Editor: "Go easy, officer. Everyone lies and cheats sometimes, as you know. For example, there's the canoodle you had with your secretary in the lock-up on Tuesday night, which would look great on page three."

Gibbs: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Editor: "The thank-you message you left on her phone was charming, too. Tell you what: you forget what you know, and we'll forget what we know, deal?"

The red-faced officer backs out of the room.

Murdoch stomps in, steam coming from his ears, and storms to his own desk. He barks at the editor: "So, what's the front page lead this week?"

The editor salutes. "We're doing an expose on evil lawyers who jack up alimony costs, sir."

The newspaper boss smiles. "Perfect! Good man. I don't know how you do it. It's almost like you can read my mind."

The editor bows. "You'd be surprised, sir."

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I didn't last very long at that paper. The whole thing of getting up and 2 a.m. and lurking in the streets in the hope of spotting some scandal didn't appeal.

Anyway, I hope the whole genre of "tricking stupid people" journalism is gone for ever.

Stupid people have suffered long enough, and I should know.

For more please log on to <http://mrjam.typepad.com>.

