

Offending lawmaker

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do not, for all your anger at the other person, physically touch him or her. But that is what Kamal Majumder did and because he did, he can rightly be accused of a deliberate attempt to injure Aparna Singh.

Observe what Kamal Majumder did besides causing bodily harm to the young journalist. He used an expletive which the media have not reported, for all the right reasons, and which expletive has left Aparna shocked beyond belief. But if the expletive is something the nature of which we are not aware of, we do know that the lawmaker, in that instant of law breaking on his part, hurled the term "stupid" at the Rtv reporter. That was a gross example of one individual deliberately employing a word denoting abuse at

another. MPs are not expected to use such terms, even in a state of indignation.

If they do, one can only ask the question: how did they get to be MPs and who made it possible for them to occupy such constitutionally hallowed positions?

In the case of Kamal Majumder, the list of offences appears to be going up. Throwing all caution and every ounce of decency to the winds, he ordered his hangers-on to slap Aparna. That was again a grave provocation, a clear incitement to lawlessness on the part of one elected to make laws to ensure a smooth working of social order. Majumder did not stop there. In full, clear view of citizens before Monipur High School and College, he demanded that someone fire into the crowd

that had by then gathered to put him in his place.

And this is what he said, in Bangla, "ei, guli chala". Roughly translated, it is "fire away" or "shoot". You ask, appalled: is this man a parliamentarian, really? And then you remember all the past incidents of wrongdoing, some of them bordering on the less than moral on the part of politicians, which went into an undoing of the AL government elected in June 1996.

Such men as Kanal Majumder have consistently humiliated citizens and embarrassed their own parties. And yet their party leaders have equally consistently chosen them, election after election, to speak for the people in parliament.

The language Majumder used on Tuesday was anything but parliamentary.

Worse, it was a clear threat held out to Aparna Singha, to all citizens -- they can be slapped, kicked, molested and even murdered if they so much as protest the wrongdoing of a man linked to the party in power.

In any civilised society, the AL lawmaker would be facing a plethora of questions from the police over his threat of violence, over his assault on the media. In any democratic country, the government would swiftly step in to condemn such an offender and then let the law take its own, natural course. Speaking of which one now must go a little deeper into the wrongdoing that the authorities of the school at the head of whose governing body Majumder sits are guilty of having committed.

Where the government has

decreed that no more than Tk 5,100 can be taken by a school from a pupil for purposes of admission, Monipur School has cheerfully been busy devising the many sinister ways of extracting -- or extorting -- between Tk 20,000 and Tk 26,500 from guardians. It is a situation which calls for a criminal investigation into the activities of all those involved in the administration of the school -- the headmaster, the chairman and members of the governing body, indeed everyone caught in this nefarious act. The law has patently been broken here. And because it has, it becomes an imperative for the state to prosecute those who have demonstrated such audacity and see them through to punishment.

The authorities of Monipur School and all

other schools which have been trying to skirt around the law in order to achieve their questionable purposes must be subjected to thorough investigation and the financial profit they have made out of their admissions business should be handed back to those guardians who had coughed up the exorbitant amount.

The incident on Tuesday, beyond and above the points already spoken of, ought to be an opportunity for change to be brought about in the way schools are administered. The practice of lawmakers heading the governing bodies of educational institutions in their constituencies must be called a halt to if education is not to decline into a trade that will corrupt politicians and send the wrong message

about values to our children. Finally, Kamal Majumder's act of humiliating journalists should not go unchecked. A clarion call must go out to the journalistic community, indeed to civil society as a whole, that the time is here for politics to be retrieved from the clutches of those who keep striking away at its nobility of purpose.

Collectively, with that sense of clarity working in them, citizens now expect the prime minister to put the leash on their unruly followers -- in the party, in parliament, in its affiliated organisations.

Chittagong has happened. Narayanganj has happened. And now Comilla has happened. These are portents of doom the ruling party can ignore at peril to its future.

And the future is only two years away.

DAMASCUS BOMBING
Syria pledges 'iron fist' response

BBC ONLINE

Syria's interior ministry has vowed to "strike back with an iron fist" at what it says is a recent "escalation" of anti-government terror attacks.

It comes after a bomb in the capital, Damascus, killed at least 26 civilians and members of the security forces.

Opposition groups have accused the government of planting the bomb to discredit their opponents and influence Arab League monitors.

The monitors are assessing the progress of a regional peace plan.

But activists say the government crackdown has continued, with scores of people killed since the monitors arrived.

The UN says more than 5,000 civilians have been killed since protests against President Bashar al-Assad began 10 months ago.

The Damascus blast happened at a busy junction in the Midan district of Damascus. State TV showed the shattered blood-stained windows of what appeared to be a bus carrying policemen.

Authorities say most of those killed were civilians, but some security personnel were among the casualties.

Interior Minister Ibrahim al-Shaar blamed the attack on a suicide bomber, who he said had "detonated himself with the aim of killing the largest number of people".

"We will strike back with an iron fist at anyone tempted to tamper with the security of the country or its citizens," he said.

Samson H Chowdhury laid to rest

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Baptist Church for the final ritual around 10:15am.

His wife, sons, daughter, friends, relatives and colleagues and an overwhelming number of admirers and commoners were present at the funeral.

The coffin of the visionary businessman was later brought to Square Bhaban in the town where the Square Group employees paid their homage with wreaths. Around 2:00pm, Chowdhury was laid to rest in his Astra Farmhouse.

"We have lost our guardian," said Samson H Chowdhury, the youngest brother of Samson. His other brother Sotyen Chowdhury remained grief-stricken and speechless. "Samson H Chowdhury, the honourable chairman

of Square Group, never treated us as employees, rather like his children. We have lost a great soul," Md Hamidullah Hassan, president of the workers association of the corporate house, told The Daily Star.

Although he is no more, we are committed to carrying on his legacy and working to make his dream a success, he added.

Several thousand locals and people from various social, political and cultural organisations and educational institutions, including Pabna University of Science and Technology, district units of Awami League and BNP, Ananda Gobinda Public Library, Pabna Press Club, Sammilito Sangskritik Jote, placed wreaths at the grave of the business icon.

State minister for home

Shamsul Haque Tuku, president of Pabna district unit AL Shamsur Rahman Sharif, also the lawmaker of Pabna-4 constituency, Anti-Corruption Commissioner Md Shahabuddin, CEO of Maarsanga Television Syed Fahim Munaim, Zila Parishad Administrator Md Saidul Haque Chunnu, Municipality Mayor Kamrul Hassan Mintu and many other distinguished personalities joined Samson's funeral.

"Businessman is too small a word to describe Samson H Chowdhury. He was a visionary. His dream was to develop the country. A character of such magnitude is very hard to find in the corporate world. Bangladesh has definitely lost an asset," said State Minister Tuku.

"Death cannot end a

person's dreams. Samson H Chowdhury will live in the heart of the people of Bangladesh," said the Pabna zila administrator.

Many of the people present in the funeral said Chowdhury's life and achievement are a book of lessons to the new generation.

The visionary business leader started his career from his ancestral residence in Pabna from 1952. In 1958, Samson along with his three friends established a small medicine factory and never had to look back ever since. He reached the pinnacle of success through hard labour and honesty.

Samson H Chowdhury passed away at Raffles Hospital in Singapore on January 5 from old-age complications. He was 86.

Guardians protest

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admission.

Putting up barricades, more than 2,000 guardians and students with banners held human chains on both sides of Begum Rokeya Sarani near the school's Shewrapara branch.

Meanwhile, students of Monipur High School and College's main branch and their guardians gathered in front of the school at Mirpur-2 around 9:00am.

Holding placards and banners, they formed a human chain, which later turned into a demonstration.

Students and guardians in yesterday's demonstrations criticised lawmaker Kamal Majumder for assaulting a female reporter

the school premises to maintain law and order. The demonstration ended without any untoward incidents but led to huge traffic congestion on Begum Rokeya Sarani.

On January 5, Kamal Majumder reportedly forced students and teachers of Monipur school and some other local schools to hold a human chain in protest against the "conspiracy".

Sustained growth in agriculture sector

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state-run agencies, and special rehabilitation schemes for farmers of cyclone-hit and haor areas to recoup previous losses.

But a particular initiative by the agriculture ministry, in a way, revolutionises the livelihood of an 18 million-strong farming community. They were provided with farm input cards that helped them open bank accounts and get access to the benefits of farm inputs and subsidies directly through banking channel.

In tandem with such initiatives by the agriculture ministry, the government also made sure food grains in the market were available thereby containing already high food prices from further rise.

To cushion the poor and vulnerable ones from the

effects of high prices of rice, the government significantly enhanced its allocation of rice for subsidised open market sale (OMS) from less than 2 lakh tonnes in fiscal 2008-09 to nearly 9 lakh tonnes in the last fiscal year (2010-11).

It is to the credit of the food ministry that when as many as 20 private bidders, even after winning the bids, failed to import rice and wheat to supplement the domestic production over the last two years, the government cancelled those bids and signed three-year to five-year long bilateral import deals with Vietnam, Thailand and Ukraine so that a sustained import line remains open under public sector.

That smart move helped the government keep its food reserve at an optimum

level creating the confidence that any domestic crop failures would not be a major problem.

Ensuring availability of food in the market was the main thrust of the government's efforts to cope with a lot of balancing jobs in the volatile food front.

The efforts were to be made to ensure that import shipments are on schedule to meet the gap between domestic cereal output and the rising demand, to reign in surging food prices and also to infuse food and cash flows in the rural economy so that one-third of the population living below the poverty-line do not go hungry.

Other than OMS operation, the government also increased food supply through various other year-round public food distribu-

tion mechanisms including VGD, VGE, Fair Price Card programmes, and thereby made food available and accessible to both rural and urban poor.

Before this government's takeover, the annual food distribution was somewhat around 1.3 million tonnes under the PFDS whereas it was raised to 2.7 million tonnes in the last fiscal year and the projected distribution for the current fiscal now stands at 2.9 million tonnes.

Social safety net programmes (SSNPs) expenditure was around 1.5 to 1.8 percent of the national gross domestic production (GDP) before the present government took over. The government expanded the SSNPs, many of which are food-aided, to 2.5 percent of the GDP in

the current fiscal year. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics cites this as a major factor in reducing poverty rate from 40 percent in 2005 to 31 percent now.

However, as the number of SSNPs and quantity of food grains being dished out through PFDS increased over the last three years, concern about the quality and fairness of such activities also surfaced.

Although law enforcers detained many unscrupulous traders, officials and grassroots level political activists for misappropriation of food grains meant for distribution among the poor, there still remains some systemic lacunae that need to be mended.

Food officials also admit flaws in monitoring and political pressure at times.

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