

Our disappearing citizens

Government must unearth the truth

MYSTERIOUS disappearances and secret killings of citizens have rightly raised concerns not only in the country but outside as well. This much is evident from the worries expressed by the Asian Human Rights Commission on the issue. Add to that the recent reports by the rights groups Ain O Salish Kendra and Odhikar about the alarming rise in the numbers of those who disappeared or were murdered in unexplained circumstances. The ASK findings speak of fifty one citizens going missing last year and of the bodies of fifteen of them being recovered. For Odhikar, while eighteen people vanished in 2010, there were thirty who could not be traced in 2011. Now, with the AHRC calling for an investigation into the matter, it becomes important that the government pay attention to the issue.

We have unequivocally and unreservedly upheld the principles of democracy in this country. And because we have, we firmly believe that in a democratic dispensation it is inconceivable that citizens will disappear and the various agencies of the government will have no explanation for it. A common thread which binds the AHRC, ASK and Odhikar is their feeling that the secret killings and disappearances are attributable to the law enforcers and security agencies. Obviously, therefore, something of grave note has been happening here. If the agencies of the government have been behind the disappearances and killings, it is for the prime minister as well as home minister to sit up and take notice and take the necessary action. We in Bangladesh are fully aware of the stories of disappearances of people which once emanated from Latin America --- and this was at a time when military rule was a common phenomenon in the region. Disappearances do not occur in countries that have democracy working for them. Which is why our worries only get deeper since we have an elected government and yet it has said nothing and done nothing about the disappearances of citizens.

Let a broad-based investigation get underway, under individuals who may not be linked to the law enforcing or security agencies, into the problem. More importantly, let the upcoming session of the Jatiyo Sangsad take up the issue in the larger public interest and initiate discussions on it. Those who have disappeared or have been killed must be accounted for. It is the job of a government to ensure citizens' security, not to look away when some of them are abducted and then are lost for ever.

We expect swift action on the issue, unless we are to demean ourselves by staying quiet and pretending everything is all right in our world.

Fire in Chittagong

Fatalities could have been avoided

THE greatest tragedy of casualties of accidents like a sudden fire is the lack of simple safety measures that could have saved lives. Friday's fire in a building in Chittagong's Chandgaon is a case in point.

This particular fire originated from an electric short circuit at a departmental store which was in the ground floor of a four storied building where people lived. It happened when people were deep in sleep. The cause of death of five young people including a child, has been reported to be suffocation after inhaling the overpowering fumes that spread throughout the building. The main reason why they died was because there was no fire exit. It is as simple as that.

So far hundreds of people have died whether in apartment buildings or cramped garment factories because basic fire safety devices were absent. In most buildings fire extinguishers do not exist or if they do they don't work. Fire exits are also blatantly absent. Fire drills are practically unheard of in most buildings. Owners of buildings, complacent and irresponsible, have no intention of complying with such safety codes that are never really enforced.

Indiscriminate construction, congestion and defiance of basic building codes have led to such tragedies. But nobody seems to care.

Except Fahim, the teenager who lived in the building and used his presence of mind and courage to save 17 lives. It is this basic human quality that seems to be lacking in building owners, employers as well as authorities responsible for ensuring that each building has the required safety mechanisms in the event of a fire.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 15

1970

Moammar Gadhafi is proclaimed premier of Libya.

1991

The United Nations deadline for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from occupied Kuwait expires, preparing the way for the start of Operation Desert Storm.

1992

The international community recognizes the independence of Slovenia and Croatia from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

2007

Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, former Iraqi intelligence chief and half-brother of Saddam Hussein, and Awad Hamed al-Bandar, former chief judge of the Revolutionary Court, are executed by hanging in Iraq.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AN interesting roundtable discussion was held in Dhaka last week. Several leaders of the Bangladesh Diaspora from around the world were present. So were leaders representing various professions in Bangladesh. The discussions brought out the following points:

- There are now more than 8 million Bangladeshis living and working in about 200 countries round the world;
- On an average they remit about \$12 billion (2011);
- Among them are a growing number of achievers in various fields. From teaching to technology and from designing to business they are supporting diverse societies and communities speaking alien languages and adopting to different cultures;
- It is seen that Bangladeshi workers and small tradesmen are the bulk of people who remit their earnings to their families in Bangladesh. In spite of this cohort being the biggest remitters they are subject to various inconveniences. They get the least support from the host countries or from the sending country;
- Our embassies abroad also neglect this group of Bangladeshi workers and small tradesmen. The allegation is that our ambassadors are least bothered when taking up their case before the local authorities for redress;
- There is tremendous potential both in getting remittances as well as transfer of skills from our Diaspora to Bangladesh. Our policy planners have not tapped into

these aspects. Hence, Bangladesh is not deriving any benefit other than getting part of the money sent by elements of the Diaspora to their families.

But there are countries that have benefited much from their own Diaspora. Take the case of China. When their great leader Deng Xiao Ping started economic reforms and established special economic zones near Hong Kong and Shanghai back in late seventies, who started to fill these zones with industrial enterprises?

It was the Chinese Diaspora, especially from neighboring Hongkong. They brought in the money to invest and the technology. They also brought Chinese workers and managers who ran the machines and

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were accustomed to the new management style. The Diaspora had the necessary connections to bring them in swiftly. The leaders from the Diaspora also played an important role. They lobbied the Chinese government to relax many of the rules that restricted industrial growth. They also persuaded foreign companies to venture into China, thus helping them to overcome any trust deficit.

A similar thing is happening in India today and in Vietnam, and in Thailand. The results are astonishing.

But how we are dealing with our Diaspora is not inspiring. In the first instance, the government is not thinking how best to utilise this

cohort for bringing in direct foreign investment and technology. There is no specialised agency to tap into this asset. The government is concerned in just attracting remittances. So, for the moment it is encouraging some banks and exchange houses abroad to rake in the savings of the Diaspora.

No doubt, inward remittance allows the government temporary balance of payment support. It enhances the foreign exchange reserves of the country and gives the government some breathing space. But it does not usher in more industrialisation. It is time to think anew. Soon, our remittances are likely to outstrip our earnings from the readymade garment sector. So, will the surplus money received from

our Diaspora go only to feed and clothe their families and to increase the price of land in our rural and urban areas?

We must, therefore, start to craft policies to persuade the Diaspora to invest directly in Bangladesh. To start with, the government must introduce more categories of investment bonds which can be bought by our Diaspora. The money should be invested in new industries. The Diaspora should be allowed to float credible investment companies which will hire professionals to use their funds and build industries. In this matter it is better that the government remains less involved, other than giving policy support. In fact, some of the profit making

enterprises which the government is running should also over time be sold to overseas Bangladeshis to be run by paid professionals for greater profit. Our Diaspora should also participate in public-private partnership programmes to build our physical infrastructure.

An effort must be simultaneously made by government to bring more remittance through legal channels. The proportion of savings sent through hundi needs to be further reduced by introducing incentives for money to be sent through formal channels. This could immediately add another \$5-8 billion to the national coffers.

So why does Bangladesh wait expectantly for foreigners to invest? Perhaps it is not sure to what extent the Diaspora can initially come in with their money. But let us begin the process.

Modern technology and skills are likely to follow into the country if the Diaspora invests. Our sons and daughters who go abroad to study do not need to look for jobs in foreign countries once they complete their studies. They can immediately return to the country to run these enterprises where their families have invested.

So, in effect, the Diaspora is increasingly seeking reliable investment banks or companies in Bangladesh that will act with due diligence and support their efforts to get better returns on their investment, than what they can expect from buying scarce land or other assets.

Is this too much that our Diaspora is asking?

The writer is a former Ambassador and Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies. E-mail: ashfaq303@gmail.com

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

In China, the grievances keep coming

YU HUA

Apeculiar feature of Chinese society is that a complaint process runs parallel to, but outside, the legal system.

Victims of corruption and injustice have no faith in the law, and yet they dream that an upright official will emerge to right their wrongs. Although a complaint mechanism is in place at all levels of Chinese government, petitioners seem to believe that the central authorities are less susceptible to corruption, and so make Beijing their destination. By some estimates, more than 10 million complaints are filed around the country each year, far more than are heard by the regular courts.

Law in China, at least on paper, is more firmly established than it once was, and some legal experts propose doing away with the grievance system. But the government has retained it -- perhaps it, too, lacks confidence in China's laws. Also -- and crucially -- it wants to leave the petitioners some slender hope, a fantasy that one day injustice will find redress. If all hope is lost, petitioners may take more extreme action.

Often, the State Bureau for Letters and Visits simply goes through the motions of registering the complaints, then asks the petitioners' local governments to look into them. But years of failure have sharpened the petitioners' wits. They know that the only way they can put pressure on their local governments is by persistent, repeated visits to Beijing, and they realise that collective visits are even more

effective. The government rigidly controls demonstrations, but the collective submission of a complaint remains a means for ordinary people to exert pressure.

At the same time, some petitioners have come to focus more on the process of lodging a complaint than on the outcome. Seeing the judiciary as biased and the grievance process as a sham, they treat petitioning as a means of extortion.

Here's an example. In fall 2007, during the Chinese Communist Party's 17th Congress, a man from Shandong province phoned his village chief and told him he was in

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Tianjin and about to board a train for Beijing to appeal a miscarriage of justice. The village chief was shocked: If the petitioner were to appear in Tiananmen Square at such a prominent moment, not only would the chief lose his job, but his immediate superiors -- the township and county chiefs -- would be disgraced as well. He begged the villager not to go to Beijing. All right, the man said, but there was a price for his acquiescence: 20,000 yuan, about \$2,600 at the time. The village chief put down the phone, withdrew this sum from public funds, and personally delivered it that very day, to the man's wife.

The pay-off should not surprise us. Alarmed by worsening social

unrest, government officials have adopted "stability maintenance" as a mantra -- and a pretext to stifle protest. While the grievance process coexists politely with the regular legal system, the insistence on maintaining stability is, all too often, utterly at odds with it.

The priority now given to keeping order has enabled local officials to regain the initiative when there are complaints or protests. In the name of maintaining stability, the interception and detention of petitioners seems perfectly reasonable, and higher-ups look the other way.

After the collision of two high-

speed trains near the southeastern city of Wenzhou in July, relatives of those killed and injured rushed to the scene. Three days later, law offices in Wenzhou received an urgent notice from the local judicial bureau and lawyers' association: "The train collision is a major, sensitive incident that bears on social stability." The notice directed lawyers to "immediately report" all requests for legal assistance to the judicial bureau and the lawyers' association and not to "respond to such requests without authorisation."

When the contents of this circular were revealed by the news media, an uproar ensued. The lawyers' association took responsibility and issued

an apology, saying it had issued the notice without judicial permission.

But the lawyers' association takes orders from the judiciary, so this apology was greeted on the Internet with derision. It reminded me of the old adage, "A soldier fears his superior more than he fears the foe."

The recent episode in Wukan, a village in southern China where residents staged an uprising that received international attention, reflected the uneven balance among the grievance process, the legal system and the insistence on stability. Local officials ignored complaints about corruption involving the sale of farmland and then cracked down on the subsequent protests. The uproar was eventually resolved through political arrangements, not judicial action.

In China, an extramarital love interest who comes between a happy couple is known pejoratively as "Little Three." The expression appears in a joke about three kindergartners who want to play house. "I'll be the daddy," the boy says. "I'll be the mommy," one girl says. Another girl frowns: "I guess I'll have to be Little Three."

If the law, the grievance process and stability maintenance were ever to play house, I think we'd see the following exchange: "I'm the daddy," Stability Maintenance says.

"I'm the mommy," Grievance Process says. The Law pouts, "Well, I'm Little Three."

The writer is author of *China in Ten Words*. This essay was translated by Allan H. Barr from the Chinese.

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