

SUNDAY POUCH

Disappearances reach a horrific proportion

To be in denial is unacceptable

IT is with a jarring trepidation that we note the revelations by the human rights organization Aine O Salish Kendra about the increasing number of disappearances allegedly at the hands of law enforcing agencies. No less than 100 persons have been victims of disappearances since the present government assumed office in January 2010. Of all the victims, only three have been released and 21 found dead while the rest remain missing.

What can be a more damning indictment on the government's failure to uphold the rule of law? The test of good governance is in securing the lives of its citizens. If constantly stalked by the fear of abduction involving even high-profile individuals, how can the ordinary people ever feel secure at home and in the streets? What is more appalling; there has barely been any progress in investigations into the abduction cases and no clue as to the fate of the missing persons, far less their whereabouts.

We have repeatedly stressed that any act of disappearance amounts to the worst possible impingement of human rights. There are laws to deal with anyone suspected or accused of crimes. They just can't be made to vanish into thin air.

Normally, when a disappearance takes place we regard it as an act of a criminal. Then it is linked to either business or political rivalry. But for the last three years since Operation Clean Heart and formation of RAB the finger is getting pointed to them. This is very sad and worrisome.

We recall the Home Minister Shahara Khatun dismissing outright the allegation that the abductors were not law enforcers in 'plainclothes'. However, the law enforcing agencies have yet to prove the allegations wrong since all the incidents remain a mystery for lack of proper investigation. Sometimes even investigations have not got underway. It is noteworthy that Human Rights Commission Chairman Mizanur Rahman has complained time and again of the concerned agencies' negligence in replying to the commission's queries about incidents of abduction.

The denial and trivialization modes that the government settles into in the face of huge number of disappearances are simply unacceptable.

Access to credit for the poor

Our ranking in South Asia inspiring

A recent report, the Global Financial Inclusion Database (Global Findex) published by the World Bank in 2011 has ranked Bangladesh ahead of India and Pakistan but behind Sri Lanka in terms of access to formal financial services. Forty percent of all adults in the country have a functioning bank account that includes one-third of the poorest income people, and more than one in three women have a bank account in their own names.

This is no mean achievement when viewed in the context of bringing more people into the fold of formal economy.

The interpretations of the Global Findex are important for policymakers. The borrowing patterns of these groups or communities of people accessing financial services can also be ascertained, and interestingly enough, it provides an insight into what nature of financial products are being availed by the new bank customers for meeting needs such as healthcare.

We take an appreciative note of the government's efforts, through the central bank, to widen banking practices for farmers. Under the tutelage of Governor Dr. Atiur Rahman, a major thrust by Bangladesh Bank in 2009 over-saw nearly 10 million farmers open bank accounts for a nominal fee in an effort to lessen the gap between formal banking institutions and the poorest segments of society that include farmers.

Although hailed as a groundbreaking move, much remains to be done. For starters, most banks have neither the requisite branches in remote rural areas, nor do they have trained staff to cater to the unique needs of the prospective rural customer base. Given that there are healthy indications of growth of savings brought about by a change in attitudes and perceptions, coverage of financial services should be more inclusive of rural areas,



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, the railway minister faced public outrage over his Assistant Private Secretary (APS) carrying Tk.70 lakh in cash, in a microbus, allegedly heading towards the minister's house. The driver of the vehicle Azam Khan, instead of going to that address, had suddenly swerved the microbus into the premises of the Bangladesh Border Guards headquarters. He drove it inside, stopped the vehicle and raised a hue and cry, alleging that the vehicle was carrying money received as bribes for recruiting railway personnel.

The Guards arrested the people in the microbus, including the driver, and took the money into safe custody. The following day, identities were checked and verified and all except the driver were released. The driver, according to the Border Guards authorities, was later allowed to go. But he is still untraceable. The police are looking for him.

So where did he go? Is he hiding somewhere? If so, from whom? The moot question is why did he take such an action?

But what escaped most of us was that here was a person who "took the initiative" to call attention to an alleged felony, knowing fully well that he could be subsequently punished for this act. We may have, therefore, what the world describes as a typical whistle blower.

The term "whistle blower" comes from England, where a policeman blows his whistle when he spots an illegal activity, drawing the attention of other policemen and passersby. This word is now used in the context of misconduct both in public and corporate organisations (in this

Whistle blower or blackmailer?

case, the recruitment of personnel in the railways) when brought to the notice of the higher authorities.

Usually, whistle blowing is known to carry the "voice of conscience." But can we assume that Azam Khan was such a voice? He had reportedly demanded Tk.5 lakhs out of the 70 lakhs as his share for keeping quiet about this felony. But, as reported, the APS refused to part with any money. The driver then stepped on the accelerator of the microbus and headed into the Border Guard Headquarters and spilled the beans. So, in effect, to many he is more a blackmailer or a blackguard than a whistle blower.

Whistle blowers throughout his-

blower protection law. Their Law Commission has recommended what they call Public Interest Disclosure (Protection of Informants) Act. The Indian Upper House, the Rajya Sabha, is now discussing the bill.

Whistle blowing has impacted the history of many countries. In 1971, one Daniel Ellsberg leaked a secret account of the Vietnam War to the New York Times. The paper revealed the endemic deception by US administrations. This subsequently led to public agitation, bringing an end to the war. In 2005, Mark Felt, known for a long time as "Deep Throat," leaked information about US President Richard Nixon's

blower with a part of the money recovered. We are not sure whether driver Azam Khan had been assured of such protection or reward by any authority that prompted him to make this hasty disclosure.

Whistle blowing is an important mechanism to check corruption in a developing country like Bangladesh. Some of our government offices as well as some private businesses which are prone to corrupt practices could benefit from whistle blowing. But it must be understood that whistle blowing is different from blackmailing. The media, through talk shows as well as informed articles, should make the difference known to the public as well as to the law enforcement agencies. Transparency International could set up a knowledge centre to disseminate to the people the difference between the two as well as inform them of the legal protection that a whistle blower is entitled to.

Can our law makers consider tabling a comprehensive whistle blowing law to protect the whistler and prevent the blackmailer? Bangladesh would then be well on the way to shed the stigma of being one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

In the meantime, if driver Azam Khan is found will he be booked by the police? What could be the likely charges? Can he be accused of blackmailing and extortion? Or will he be simply interrogated and determined as a whistle blower? In that case, would he deserve the protection of the state? But there could be more than what meets the eye. Let us see whether his act is judged as beneficial or as a malfeasance.

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tory told the public or someone in authority about dishonest or illegal activities in a government department or in a private organisation or even in a business company.

Sometimes the allegations are made internally. At other times they are made externally to regulators, law enforcement agencies, the media, etc., seeking redress.

Because whistle blowers can face reprisals or personal attacks by the persons or organisations which they accuse, there are laws in many countries now to protect them. A dozen or more countries have enacted whistle blower protection laws to prevent any harm to anyone that spills the beans. The USA, the UK and Canada have such laws. India is now considering adopting a whistle

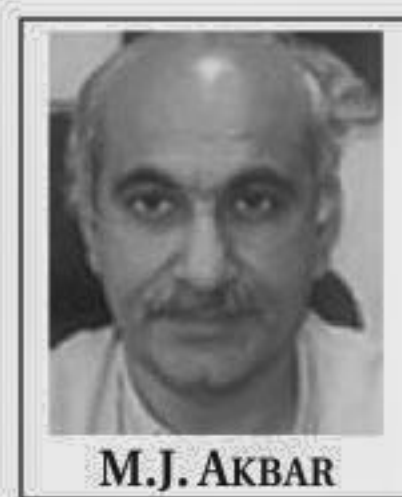
involvement in Watergate. It ultimately led to the resignation of the US president and a prison term for the White House chief of staff.

Julian Assange, the founder and editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, has supplied 1.2 million leaks to date from 2006, about the shenanigans of US diplomats around the world. He has also provided information about Cablegate, which was the main cause of the recent Tunisian revolution. This has led to other revolutions in the Middle East.

Now what are the types and nature of protection that a whistle blower can expect? These range from protection of his life and that of his family members to protection of his job, pay and his pension. It can also mean providing the whistle

BYLINE

A Pilgrim's Progress



M.J. AKBAR

THE British Museum should, in all propriety, be renamed the British Empire Museum. The largest repository of human genius

is a magnificent tribute to three centuries of commercial and political power. The Empire and its diaspora had three overlapping shores: lands that were directly ruled; regions under domination (hence Dominions); and an arc of grip sanctified by treaty (as in the Indian or Malaysian princely states) or justified by gunboat diplomacy (as in China).

Greed was hardly unknown to British conquistadors like Clive, but give his successors credit for one quality: they reserved a part of what they picked up from natives through coercion, bribery or rights of conquest for a national treasury that believed that treasure was much more than currency. The British Museum is an asset from the balance sheet of civilisation.

The worm in this apple is the difference between custody and ownership. Winston Churchill famously thought the sun never set on the British Empire, and then presided over sunset; but by his logic the old colonies were perfectly entitled to dismiss the British Museum as the principal warehouse of daylight robbery. You can therefore either moan about what has been lost, or you can gaze in admiration at what has been preserved. If you are a good Indian, as I am, you

can do both.

London is littered with the glory of India since India was the fountainhead of British power and the hunting ground of its grandees. But when I see the theft, plunder and sheer destruction that Indians have inflicted upon their fabled heritage, a carnage that has not quite ended, I am a bit relieved that some British nabobs had the decency to preserve what they stole.

The British sometimes give the impression of being slightly embarrassed by this past. They offer wob-

more. The British had taunted the Caliph that they were the true "Muhammadan" power since more Muslims lived under the British than in Ottoman space. Now their taunt had bite. In 1918 the British became the first non-Muslims to control Mecca and Medina since the birth of Islam.

One Ottoman official refused to surrender when the Caliph capitulated, the governor of Medina. He was not wrapped in delusion. He had a purpose. He held on for ten months because he needed the time

The British, unlike say the French, dislike being exhibitionist. But no one can turn an exhibition into a triumph quite like them. Perhaps the British flower in anonymity, since there is no personal signature to such a collective effort.

bly explanations, as for instance that this or that was obtained "legally." This reminds me of Vicerines who expected a "gift" of the Maharajah's jewels whenever they were invited for dinner -- and woe the Maharajah who forgot. Victor's logic was equally evident on more substantive matters. Lord Palmerston rationalised Britain's punitive and illegal opium trade by arguing that corrupt Chinese officials had allowed the ban to lapse. It worked until it worked.

The high point of British rule came in 1918, just 29 years before it crumbled where it had started, India. But in 1918 admirers and advocates were confident that the Empire would last four centuries

to transfer the few, sparse personal possessions of the Prophet Muhammad from Medina to Turkey. Otherwise, he said, they would end up in the British Museum. They are today in the Topkapi palace in Istanbul.

And so the Prophet's cloak was not on display at the British Museum's magnificent exhibition on Hadj, the journey to the heart of Islam, Mecca. I was privileged to share that journey last week during a visit to London.

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to such a collective effort. But never has a bureaucracy been more inspiring. The mellifluous, evocative music of the azaan greeted me at the door. Verses urging humility towards men and reverence before God explained the essence of the Quran. This was the one God of Abraham; the Hadj is an Abrahamic pilgrimage for the Kaaba was built by him and his son Ishmael.

A copy of the first written Quran, set down in the time of the Caliph Umar two years after the Prophet's death, mocked the tribe of sensationalists who thrive on hatred towards the faith by spreading lies about the Book. There was history: the Begum-Nawab of Bhopal scolding the Ottoman governor for leaving pilgrims at the mercy of greed or theft; or a selection of flasks to carry back water from the Zamzam, the spring that saved Abraham's wife Hajr and her son Ishmael from death, which was rediscovered by the Prophet's grandfather Abd-al Muttalib. There was wit, as in the quote from the great Persian poet Saadi who noted that a pawn which travelled the length of a chessboard could become a queen, but many a Haji who had travelled the length of a desert had only become worse. There was wonder and pride on the faces of hundreds of schoolchildren and adults who flocked to this moving, magical tour.

The British Museum had turned an exhibition on pilgrimage into another pilgrimage.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 22

1930
The United Kingdom, Japan and the United States sign the London Naval Treaty regulating submarine warfare and limiting shipbuilding.

1945
World War II: Führerbunker. After learning that Soviet forces have taken Eberswalde without a fight, Adolf Hitler admits defeat in his underground bunker and states that suicide is his only recourse.

1948
1948 Arab-Israeli War: Haifa, a major port of Israel, is captured from Arab forces.

2005
Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi apologizes for Japan's war record.