

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# A government under mounting pressure



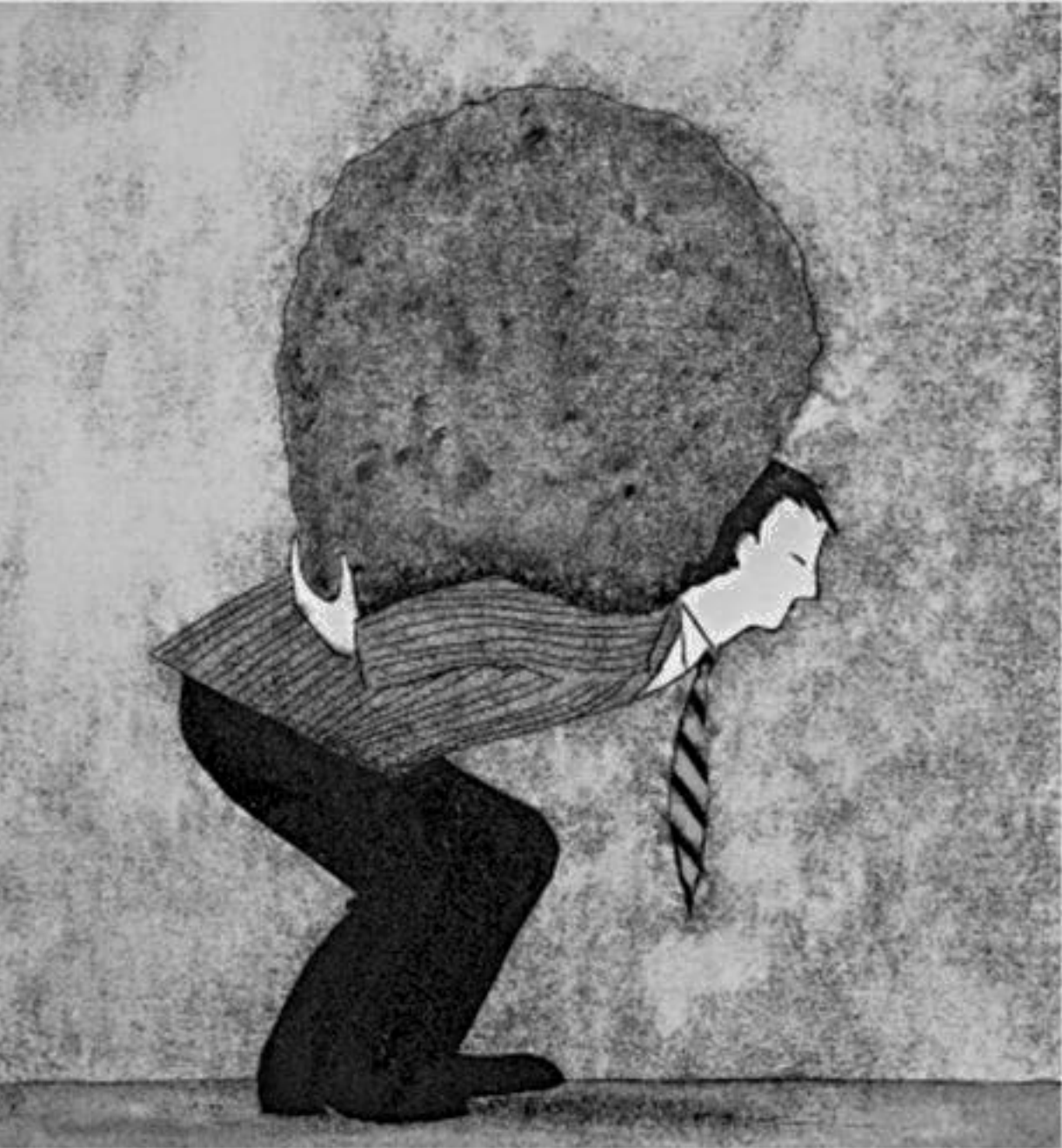
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE AL government never had it so bad. Perhaps it has embraced the British-born Oscar winning actor Sir Michael Caine's words in the reverse. He said: "When just about everything is going your way, you're obviously in the wrong lane." Apparently, Sheikh Hasina has everything going the bad way, so she must be on the right road. It all began with Hillary Clinton's words of counsel. Then it worked its way through concerns voiced in a chorus by eight envoys of European Union in Dhaka. The straw on the camel's back came as Dipu Moni was told in New Delhi that Teesta water sharing deal was being put in cold storage. Hillary's soft diplomacy on the last day in the company of Nobel Laureate former Grameen Bank chief Professor Yunus and internationally reputed Brac's Fazle Hasan Abed was meant to be a sideline event. But in effect it highlighted her, or shall we say, US' dealings with non-state actors. The three stressed the need for an interim non-partisan caretaker arrangement to hold the next general election. That stirred the hornet's nest. Awami League Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said that our internal political problem would have to be solved by us. One couldn't agree more with him including Hillary herself, who actually said: "We could only advise and it is up to the government to accept it or not." Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith has termed Hillary

Clinton's supportive comments on Professor Yunus and Grameen Bank "unwarranted." The Bangladesh finance minister has asserted that Grameen Bank is a government institution, but government effectively owns only 3% of the bank; the rest is owned by 83 lakh depositors, most of them women. The finance minister "rubbished" Professor Yunus' reported concern that government was trying to control the Grameen Bank. The finance minister has every right to defend the government's position but he could do so with magnanimity which is the highest form of intelligence. This is not to bandy about Professor Yunus' international standing to refer to the Congressional Gold Medal he is going to receive, entering the Hall of Honour with Winston Churchill for one. The EU ambassadors collaterally to Hillary Clinton's concerns over disappearances, killings, unsettling political scenario added corruption to the list reinforcing the call for urgent talks between political parties to end the apocalyptic crisis. As if these pressures were not enough of an embarrassment for the government, a setback comes from Foreign Minister Dipu Moni coming empty handed on the Teesta deal from New Delhi. She had gone for a

joint commission meet with her Indian counterpart S.M. Krishna. She was told in no uncertain terms that signing of a Teesta deal was off the table and couldn't be expected anytime soon. This was clearly heart-breaking for Bangladesh foreign minister who expressed her disappointment adding it could give a jolt to Indo-Bangla relations. Earlier in Dhaka the Indian finance minister had frankly admitted that the border protocols would be delayed as their ratification through parliament required a "special majority" which the Congress-led UPA government clearly lacked. The Indo-Bangla honeymoon clearly strays under clouds. The high hopes kindled by Manmohan-Sheikh Hasina accords to usher in a new era in the bilateral relationship are yet to be matched by tangible results. On the contrary, the Teesta deal is stalled solely to accommodate "changed priorities" including Mamata Banerjee's hardened mindset not to risk voter support in North Bengal for the local and Lok Sabha polls. Mamata aims to emerge from a regional voice to a national player. The Indian presidential election is also

a factor occupying the mind of political parties juggling with their respective equations. A news item sourced in India says that if there is no Teesta deal they couldn't get access through Bangladesh territory to its north-eastern region. That's why they are considering reviving the alternative transit route by implementing Kaladan Multimodal Project which they had adopted some years back. This envisages using Kaladan river and land in Myanmar to join Indian mainland with its north-eastern state of Mizoram. This would take up to 2014 to be in place and may be commissioned on a short-term basis. Dipu Moni has hinted at a "sustainable" solution, though. A section of Indian experts believe that AL government's denial of sanctuary to insurgents from the Indian north-eastern region has reduced the security costs for the Indian government. They are concerned that should Teesta deal not come through, it could put Hasina government at a political disadvantage in relation to the forces opposed to her. The AL has nothing to lose by conceding on the caretaker issue which would in fact strengthen its standing with the people and help it regain the ground it has lost. Remember the famous De Gaulle -- Winston Churchill encounter. De Gaulle, self-exiled in Britain after the fall of France, would keep up with his megalomaniac demeanour. Churchill said something like this, I bow in and bow out, why don't you? To this, De Gaulle said, you have everything, I have nothing, I am too poor to bow down. The French statesman's retort is not strictly relevant here. Even so, if Churchill could bend, why couldn't our leaders? The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net



DIGITAL VISION

## Corporal punishment: evil cruelty beyond human belief

SIR FRANK PETERS

IF evidence were needed to stop the abomination of madness, cruelty and evil that still persists in Bangladeshi schools, one needs look no further than May 1 when insanity rained down upon 14 innocent Allah-fearing, Allah-loving 8-12-year-olds at a *madrassa* in Dhaka. And while most folks can be indifferent to the inhuman torture that took place at the Talimul Quran Mahila Madrassah at Namashyampur in Kadamtali, the same cannot be said for the children who have to bear the ugly mental and physical scars of someone's mental disorder for the rest of their lives. If not for the photographic evidence it would all seem like a bad dream ... a nightmare ... totally unbelievable ... the ramblings of a demented reporter ... a scene from a fictional horror movie, but try telling that to the 14 young girls who suffered abominably in their quest to become closer to Allah. And while most Bangladeshis can take some comfort in the knowledge that it isn't their child who suffered inhumanely -- this time -- the same cannot be said for the loving parents, grandparents, extended families and the children themselves. It must be obvious by now, even to the most ignorant among us that all forms of corporal punishment -- verbal, non-verbal and physical -- must stop immediately. What additional proof is needed? What other cruelty must a child endure before their tearful voices for help are heard? What happens when they have no more tears left to cry? What happens when their tears never dry? No teacher, no human being on earth has the right to do what "teacher" Jesmin Akhter (now in jail) did to her fourteen pupils. One can't help but wonder what was going through her mind at the time. The corporal punishment given the pupils wasn't the regular (although illegal) slap-on-the-hand-with-a-stick that scars the mind for life when the pain and bruising has disappeared, but a far worse horrifically-cruel punishment that also scars their tender young skin for life. Did this sadistic "teacher" think the parents of the children wouldn't notice the scars or wouldn't care? Or, did she just not care? More importantly, the children, what were their thoughts? I can't even attempt to imagine how they felt as they lined-up to be

branded like animals with a red-hot cooking spatula and having to listen to the sizzling sound and horrific excruciating screams of their fellow classmates who stood obediently in line before them while smelling the fresh burning flesh. Horrors of Austwitch immediately spring to my mind, and equal hopelessness and despair. What was going through their innocent minds? It most certainly wasn't a replay of a Mr. Bean comedy, animated cartoon, or a light-hearted and enchanting Walt Disney movie. I can only hazard a guess, and it's not pretty. Did they pray to Allah like they never prayed before that the "teacher" would come to her senses and stop the cruelty and madness or someone nearby would hear their screams, run to and rescue them? Did they feel let down by their loving parents who put their total trust in the school and who sent them there for "their own good" and to learn to love and appreciate the ways of Allah more? Did they feel let down by the school that gave employment to such a

of those 14 tender-aged girls when they walked into their hell-on-earth that day. The time has come for each and every parent to sit and speak with their child/children; and ask uncomfortable and awkward questions about corporal punishment in their school. The ostrich approach of sticking one's head in the ground and wishing, hoping, praying, and wanting to believe that corporal punishment is not happening in their school ... to their child ... is the ignorance on which these cruel, sadistic law-breaking "teachers" feed. It is still all too common in Bangladesh for an ignorant, uneducated, but well-meaning parent to deliver a child to a school and tell the "teacher" if the child misbehaves to beat him/her in the ignorant belief it is good discipline for the child. If these "teachers" were Allah-fearing, Allah-loving and not downright hypocrites, under certain circumstances that might have been acceptable at one time, but not any more.

It's just over a year ago that a glimmer of light was seen at the end of a 40-year-old tunnel of corporal punishment madness. Learned Supreme Court judges and modern-day heroes of Bangladesh Justice Md. Imman Ali and Justice Md. Sheikh Hassan Arif outlawed corporal punishment practices in all schools, without exception, throughout Bangladesh and declared the act of corporal punishment: "Cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and a clear violation of a child's fundamental right to life, liberty and freedom." It is vitally important that children and parents stand up for their rights and realise that for the first time in the entire history of Bangladesh that the law and the Ministry of Education are on their side (with special heart-felt thanks to Education Minister Nurul Islam and Secretary Dr. Kamal Naser Chowdhury) and that they report, speak out against and under no circumstances -- no circumstances -- accept corporal punishment abuses. Some parents may not be in a financial position to provide their children with worldly comforts, but all -- without exception -- can give their children love and protection from corporal punishment cruelty, and those gifts alone are priceless.

The writer is a former newspaper and magazine publisher and editor, an award-winning writer, humanitarian, Goodwill Ambassador and Senior Adviser to European and Saudi royalty, and a loyal foreign friend of Bangladesh.

## Culture for sustainability

IRINA BOKOVA

CULTURAL diversity is a reality of this globalised world. We need now better policies to make the most of it. From music and film to publishing and multimedia, the story is the same everywhere. Cultural and creative industries are driving innovation, creating jobs and forging social cohesion. This drive is especially powerful in Bangladesh, where the protection of culture and language stands at the forefront of the country's development and social cohesion. Culture means jobs, and growth, and participation. Its potential for sustainable development carries special meaning in the Asia-Pacific region. In the coming years, Asia will record the highest growth rate of all regions in the entertainment and media industry, with more than a 9% compound annual growth rate. Despite a global economic crisis, cultural and creative industries are alive and growing in the region and across the globe. This is not an accident. Many countries in the region are putting in place strategies and policies to develop their creative economies. These must be taken further. Cultural diversity holds keys to releasing the creative energies societies need today. We need new ideas and approaches to move the world towards a more sustainable future. We need new skills to live and work together, and new forms of citizenship for a rich and plural environment.

efforts by all states to ratify the Convention. The stakes are high, today and for the century ahead. Culture was left out of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000. We cannot let this happen again. Culture must lie at the heart of the global development agenda we set to follow 2015. This is why, for more than a decade, Unesco has worked tirelessly to place culture at the forefront of development strategies and cooperation. We are gaining ground. Thanks to our advocacy, international community is increasingly acknowledging the role of culture in sustainable development. It is our shared responsibility to design development strategies that are sensitive to the cultural specificities of peoples, in order to gain their full support and participation. This starts today. The writer is Director General, Director General of UNESCO for Diversity of Cultural Expression: Ministerial Forum of the Asia-Pacific Region.

We have strong ground to build on. In 2005, countries around the world adopted UNESCO's landmark "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions." This is the first standard-setting instrument that recognises the distinctive nature of cultural goods as vehicles of identity, and the first to place culture and development at its core of action. The Convention is our tool to build a world that thrives on diversity. Step by step, states are using the Convention's mechanisms to build the cultural infrastructures they need. 122 Parties are putting in place strategies and policies to develop their creative economies. On this basis, Cambodia, for instance, has created new platforms of dialogue for the development of a new cultural policy. More states must come on board. To date, only 12 of 44 countries in the Asia-Pacific region have ratified the 2005 Convention. This Forum in Dhaka is an opportunity to encourage wider



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