

BITTER TRUTH

Children: Victims of apathy and neglect



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

BANGLADESH'S young population (under 18), comprising 45% of the total population are virtually unnoticed. They are vast untapped wealth that could be turned into effective manpower. Born

mostly of poor parents, the male children supplement the meager income of the parents, while most female children in urban areas work as domestic help.

A big number of them fall into the clutches of child traffickers and end up in red light areas in the country or outside.

Many child domestic help live and work in conditions that are oppressive, exploitative, abusive and worse than adults would accept for the same work. The poignant part is that as they belong to the informal labour sector, thus they are excluded from legal protection, which makes them even more vulnerable.

Most horrifyingly, around 22 to 50% of the 2.5 million people forced into labour after being trafficked are children.

According to a baseline survey (BBS and Unicef), other than 7.4 million working in the informal sector, as many as 400,000 children aged between 6-17 years, 80% of them female, work as domestic workers (CDW), and are almost invisible and inaccessible to government surveillance, NGO inspection and even to neighbours. In a report revealed by the Unicef recently, it was pointed out that the plight of the poor urban children is really horrific. They suffer much greater deprivation than those in the countryside.

Slum population has grown rapidly in the cities and towns as the landless poor migrate to these places, driven by poverty and natural disasters. With no money for proper accommodation, it is estimated that around one-third of the urban population in the six large cities now live in slums.

Most of the male children labour in factories and fields until their hands are gnarled and backs bent. Many of them wander homeless in the streets, surviving by begging and even thieving. Sleeping in railway stations or bus stands or on the footpaths, picking through garbage and sifting for food in the municipal dumps! They die every day of easily preventable diseases.

The conferences, meetings or seminars that are often convened by political parties in an effort to care for the vast population remain confined to taking agenda. Recommendations made to the policy makers in National Child Domestic Worker Convention about empowering children economically, as well as arresting exploitation, creating job opportunities for the parents in the rural areas and enacting laws to protect child workers from exploitation and abuse are fine on paper but implementation seems to be a far cry.

While there is widespread call for an end to forced child labour, some affluent and educated people have hit headlines because of their cruel treatment of these domestic help. In a report published in a Bangla daily, it was revealed that a domestic worker in the Sabujbagh area of the city died after being

subjected to torture for days. Both the husband and wife were arrested by the police later.

Girl children are not also safe in the schools. Much to our concern, teachers in many educational institutions in the country who are supposed to work primarily as educators, more precisely as moral educators, have come out as predators. A report published in Prothom Alo on August 4, 2011 said that in Ramu upazila of Cox's Bazaar, a headmaster of a school was arrested for violating a girl student who became pregnant. The

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headmaster, who was later arrested, tried to hush up the case by offering Tk.3 lakh to the victim's family.

Our failure to delve deep into this issue and grapple with it properly now threatens to explode it into a catastrophe. This will mean turning the country into a snow capped volcano -- pretty and calm at the top but serious problems seething within. Moreover, given the fact that girl children born of poor parents are married off early, the present move by the government to reduce the "children classification" age to 16 years will violate the rights of the children.

How can we fight shy of the problem that warrants our attention most? What horrify-

ing drudgery and waste of human energy at the prime of one's life due to lack of economic protection, guidance and motivation? Boys aged between 8 and 12 are engaged in hazardous jobs in most small factories, workshops, brick kilns, etc., and their daily wages range from Tk.50-80 for 12 hours a day.

Juvenile crime in Bangladesh has exploded in recent years along with organised crimes. Arrests are sometimes made but they are released on bail because of the loopholes in the investigation and strong backing by their mentors. Punishment is hardly meted out to

the real offenders. These kids are not to blame for the crimes they commit. In most cases they are lured by drug lords and some unscrupulous political masters in the area with cash money to work as couriers of drug and in the process they themselves get addicted to drugs and when

the demand for drug is so keen, they can commit any crime, even kill a person. Poor parents sometimes indulge in crimes themselves and encourage their children to work as couriers because it brings them money.

Political leaders and the people must wake up to the fact that the time for reckoning has arrived. Drug addiction and drug trafficking among youths are eating into the vitals of the nation. The police chief of the country has time and again made it plain that drug is the biggest enemy of the country and most crimes are drug-fuelled. But one wonders if the law enforcers are really very serious to wipe out this scourge! News of raids in differ-

ent areas in Dhaka city gets leaked before such raids are conducted and on no occasion could the drug lords be apprehended.

How unfortunate the situation is that the saddest casualties are children in this trade! We have a whole generation of human beings in the country who could be so productive and helpful for the country but are being lost. The drug trade obviously has shown them that in a little time they can make a lot of money, and they have accepted the violence that goes with it. Government effort to curb the daunting problem of drug smuggling, vandalism, and even child trafficking has been far from satisfactory.

The looming question is that whether the society and the government can do anything to protect the children from these scourges. What has dismayed the vast majority of the people is the tepid response of the government and the national leaders to this surge of mayhem indulged in by the youngsters. The way the whole country is plunging into chaos because of the apathy and neglect shown towards this vital section of the society, the cream of the whole population, signals a potential calamity for the whole nation.

The government must wake up to the stark reality that this vulnerable group of population needs care and sustenance to ward off the disasters facing the nation. Social welfare department may be restructured and their gamut of activities may be re-oriented in the light of the present horrifying state of the social ills creeping into the fabric of the nation.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

Promising talks between India and Pakistan

SEEMA MUSTAFA

PERHAPS it is a reflection of the personalities of the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan, but the meeting between the two sides was held without big promises made (planted through "source-based" stories in the media), high expectations banded about or, for that matter, acrimony and hostility. Not too much play was given to the imponderables as India's Ranjan Mathai and Pakistan's Jalil Abbas Jilani sat down with their teams to focus soberly and seriously on the issues at hand.

The result was thus more promising than it has been for a while. The joint statement issued by the foreign secretaries has actually taken relations forward in a constructive manner, and if the modest promises are kept, it could mark the start of a better phase in the tenuous relation between India and Pakistan. Little or no effort was made by either side to score the usual brownie points, either through conscious choice of words or self-congratulatory conferences. In fact, the joint statement is drafted in clear language, leaving little room for "source-based" interpretations.

This time, what marked the breakthrough was not what could be achieved in concrete terms, but the decision to keep the terminology sober, and to tackle the thorny issues of terrorism and Jammu and Kashmir in a language that inspires confidence but does not accentuate distrust.

The foreign secretaries recognised that both India and Pakistan were threatened by terrorism, and "reaffirmed the strong commitment of the two countries to fight and eliminate terrorism in an effective and comprehensive manner so as to eliminate the scourge in all its forms and manifestations."

This is a major step forward, as one must remember that eventually it is not media headlines, but joint statements that form the basis of bilateral discussions between governments. And, in this case, New Delhi has not only taken the extra step forward to accept Pakistan's longstanding claim of being a victim of terrorism as well, but has also "reaffirmed" its commitment to fight terrorism at all levels.

This is a major concession by India, and could well lead to the next step of joint cooperation between the two neighbours in tackling terrorism. The governments had agreed a while ago to set up a joint terror mechanism, but given the outcry in India, the proposal had been shelved.

The wording of this joint statement seems to suggest that the project could be revived with the foreign secretaries making common cause of the "scourge" that has killed hundreds in India and Pakistan.

Jammu and Kashmir apparently led to a "comprehensive exchange of views" with the foreign secretaries agreeing to continue discussions on it.

Clearly, here Pakistan did not indulge in histrionics with both sides committing themselves to "finding a peaceful solution by narrowing divergences and building convergences." Pakistan's foreign secretary did raise the usual hackles by meeting Kashmiri

separatist leaders, but then, this has become a practice what with the Indian government unflinchingly looking the other way every time.

After all, the bonhomie sensationalised by the media could not have been shared without the concurrence of New Delhi, and clearly, there is an understanding to allow these meetings to continue without interruption. After all, little is said and discussed at these meetings that our intelligence agencies are not aware of.

The understanding reached on the nuclear and conventional confidence-building measures (CBM) is significant -- both sides decided to hold separate meetings of expert groups to discuss how to implement and strengthen existing CBMs. The fact that the foreign secretaries had committed themselves to fixing dates for the proposed meetings shows a certain welcome seriousness.

There were the usual decisions to encourage sports and media contacts, to relax the visa regime, to promote parliamentary exchanges and to stop hostile propaganda. These might not seem as important as terrorism but are imperative to create an atmosphere conducive to resolving the so-called bigger issues. If India and Pakistan are to move ahead, they have to bring an end to the

hostile propaganda that directed at each other and fed to the media by governments through "official sources."

Stereotypes have to be challenged, people-to-people contacts have to be increased, and CBMs fast tracked. The two foreign secretaries seems serious about strengthening existing cross-LoC CBMs as the joint statement records the decision to hold a meeting of the working group on this on July 19 in Islamabad. These CBMs, though specified, are in disarray and hopefully, the working group's suggestions to streamline these will be implemented speedily by both India and Pakistan.

The path to peace has been torturous, often insurmountable, for India and Pakistan. However, both have to understand that peace is not just a commitment but an ideology and that they need to build an unshakeable and unflinching constituency for this. This cannot be done through hostility and acrimony, but by constructive dialogue and a certain trust and confidence that only the political process can deepen.

Civil society can act as a major pressure group, but it is for governments to muster the political will to make peace happen. Those who believe that an unstable Pakistan is in India's interest must think again. A stable and peaceful neighbour is essential for the healthy growth of a country, and India cannot develop to her full potential with unrest and violence consuming Pakistan.

All in all, this round of talks between the foreign secretaries has been promising and at least for the moment, seems to have brought both India and Pakistan a little closer. If the joint statement is not merely rhetorical, but predicated on political will, the future of South Asian peace does not look as bleak as it had around the same time last year.

The writer is a Consulting Editor of *The Statesman*

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Corruption: An acute problem

SYED EMRAN HOSSAIN

THE connection between corruption and politics in Bangladesh is not new. It is widespread, and is a hot political and controversial issue. Feuding political parties often charge each other with being corrupt. The spirit of our beloved independence was to create a land without poverty, illiteracy and corruption. Unfortunately all the governments since independence indulged in corruption, and gradually it became the most acute problem. Unless we deter corruption we cannot try to solve the other problems. It is a major hindrance for true democracy and economical prosperity.

In 2011, Bangladesh was ranked 13th from the bottom in the annual Corruption Perception Index (CPI) by the Berlin-based anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International (TI), only one position up from its position in 2010. The position is not satisfactory but better than our earlier sully label of being ranked as the most corrupt country on earth five times in a row by Transparency International during early 2000. There are endless instances of corruption, however, I would like to shed some light on the recent World Bank Loan scandal.

On April 2011 World Bank (WB) agreed to sanction \$1.2 billion loan facilities for the \$2.90 billion Padma Bridge project. Shortly after that, in June 2011, an allegation was raised that 10% commission as bribe was demanded for giving the work of \$4.70 crore to a Canadian company -- SNC-Lavalin. In September, the loan project was suspended and WB sent a letter to the government to investigate the irregularity and to take action against the wrongdoers. Some of the high officials of

the government including the allegation and asked: corruption without receive-

In November 2011, Commission (Dudok), called investigation, corruption. Our prime corruption.... otherwise faculty....." After that, early Canadian company were tant papers seized. gating team of Canadian June this year. After investigation, and WB scrapped had proof of corruption of executives, and also cooperation of Bangladesh This is a matter of dis-

country, and our image as a nation has become tainted globally. Economists, civil society and many eminent persons fear that the cancellation may have negative impact on international donors, and urged the government to provide us with clear explanation for everything. Till today, we don't know what actually happened and Dudok is still carrying out an endless investigation.

Our finance minister's statement, that it is the decision of its outgoing president Mr. Robert Zoellick and not of WB itself, is just a political response to the cancellation made to hide the government's failure. I wonder whether the ordinary people will ever know why the project was cancelled, or will it be covered up by political blame game like many other corruption issues?

For deterring corruption determination of the government is very much required. The government can implement a variety of measures and make new laws to ensure transparency and accountability of the representatives to their electorate. The power and independence of Dudok can be increased; new administrative bodies can be created for scrutinising government actions more efficiently; laws against corruption and right to information laws can be implemented strictly; and reports of Dudok can be made subject to judicial scrutiny for ensuring their accountability. However, this has been inadequately done in the last 40 years and may take many more years, and the question will always remain: "Who will bell the cat?"

It is now high time for the people to unite and raise their voice against corruption. The politicians have become audacious since they know that whatever they do, at the time of election, people will vote for their political party without considering the competency of the candidates. Therefore, we must act beyond political allegiance towards a particular political party and by doing thus we can keep a constant pressure on the corrupt representatives of the people and deter corruption.

The writer is Lincoln's Inn Barrister, Associate at H & H Company.

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the prime minister denied "Is it possible to indulge in ing the money."

Durniti Daman after carrying out their so-claimed that there was no minister told WB to "prove we will not accept the loan this year. 2 officers of the arrested and some impor- Consequently, an investi- police arrived in Dhaka in gation they submitted their the loan facility saying they Bangladeshi officials and because of non- government to take action. grace for a democratic