

Addressing root of violence on Buddhist community

Inaction in tannery relocation unacceptable

Rid people of multi-faceted hazards

THE government's inordinate delay in relocating around 200 tannery units from Hazarbagh to Savar is causing serious environmental and health hazards to a large number of people.

Protests from environment advocacy groups, the media and citizens have fallen on deaf ears of the government and tannery owners.

After several extensions of time to relocate the tanneries, at one stage the HC in June 2009 ordered the government either to shift the tanneries to the new location or shut them down by February 2010. Even so they did not budge an inch.

A Chinese company has got the go ahead to install a Tk. 500 crore Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP). It has to complete the work within 15 months since March 2012.

We see a hopeful sign here of relocation and installation of CETP to go hand in hand. The government must put pressure on the tanneries to start the relocation process.

The endless foot-dragging of the government over implementing court order compounded by apathy of the tannery owners to shift their units cannot be accepted anymore. The government's utter callousness over the issue is encouraging the tannery owners to maintain status quo, while local inhabitants continue to suffer.

The situation has reached such a critical stage that even international concern has been raised over it. The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its recent report has pointed to how workers' rights are being ignored and irreversible damage wreaked on the environment and public health by these industries.

Any further delay by the government in the matter will be a disservice. We don't want to hear any more excuse either from the government or the tannery owners.

Indeed, it is an issue of grave public concern on which we want to see urgent, energetic and concrete action.

Tayiba's tale

Hostile environment for the girl child must be removed

RECENT reports of a female madrasa student being bullied by her classmates and tortured by her teacher brings home the vulnerability of the girl child. Such incidents are underreported but occur in every sphere of life -- even at school, where we not only expect that a child's full potential will be nurtured, but where they will be protected from harm. Yet, 12-year-old Tayiba was actually punished for her abilities by those in whose care she was put -- bullied by her classmates for doing well in school, and allegedly beaten by her teacher for eating lunch when the whole class was forbidden to do so as a punishment. Unable to handle the trauma which only added to her sad childhood history of losing a parent at the age of two, she ended up at a mental institution.

For one, corporal punishment at educational institutions has been banned by the courts, but with continuing reports of its occurrence at schools across the country, how far is it really being implemented and, if not, then why not? Why are stronger monitoring mechanisms not in place and, when such incidents are reported, why are thorough investigations not conducted, followed by stern action against the culprits, which could act as a deterrent in future?

And secondly, as is sadly the case in any patriarchal society, girls and women bear the brunt of everything, with gender stereotypes, discrimination, violence and economic disparities affecting them disproportionately. While things will not change in a day, concerted efforts through social policy, legal action, political will and, perhaps most importantly, a change in mindset, is a start. Increasing our sensitivity to not the 'weaker' but the 'weakened' sex is key to bringing positive social change.

Today, while celebrating the International Day of the Girl Child, let us consider the potential and the contribution of half our population -- our girls and women -- and give them their due -- freedom from all forms of violence

S.M. RASHED

I wish to commend The Daily Star for its moral courage in exposing the truth behind the recent communal violence on the Buddhist community and desecration of the historic temple of Ramu and other places of worship instead of unqualified acceptance of the version doled out by the establishment. This is what we expect from the media.

Since all the essential facts and analysis are before the readers, I will confine myself to the larger implications of the tragedy of last September and possible way forward from the perspective of a student of political science and diplomacy.

It is said that foreign policy and diplomacy of a country are, in the ultimate analysis, extensions of its domestic policy and structure. By all accounts there has been a palpable failure of governance involving crucially the rule of law without which democracy cannot survive. This has also negatively affected the realisation of the objectives of our foreign policy. The violence on the Buddhist community and their places of worship can be largely attributed to the failure of domestic governance.

It is now clear that tension was brewing since June 2012 when Myanmar military Junta started the religious cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims and fresh influx of the Rohingya refugees started pouring into Bangladesh. What provided the immediate spark and ignited the violence was the reported tagging of a photo of desecration of the Quran on the Facebook of a Buddhist person. This gave the pretext to the yet unidentified organisers to hold a public rally, whip up religious frenzy and mobilise people from far away places to attack Ramu and other Buddhist areas. The failure of the police, the local administration and the intelligence to take timely action to prevent the outbreak of communal violence is indeed disturbing; now the authorities have started the familiar blame game.

Although the Buddhist community constitute roughly around 1% of the

population the communal violence has led to fear, insecurity and lack of trust in the government and sadly on the Muslim majority community in general with whom they lived in peaceful coexistence for so many years.

The probe body set up by the government is essentially a bureaucratic one. It is no surprise that it is seen as a palliative by many who doubt if it will allay the fear and restore confidence of the Buddhist community. I will therefore, call for the formation of a broad based enquiry committee

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consisting of a cross-section of eminent citizens, jurists, retired judges, media personalities and others known for their integrity and objectivity. We can then expect a neutral and fair probe.

The findings of the committee should be made public and action taken against the identified culprits on the basis of the findings without delay. At the same time, all political parties and members of the civil society, instead of indulging in blame game for narrow partisan gains, should collectively work to heal the wound and infuse renewed confidence into the Buddhist and minority communities for the larger

national interest.

While beefing up the physical security through deployment of army, strengthening of the police force and improved intelligence are also needed; though such measures alone would not bring about a durable peace based on my personal involvement with peace and conflict resolution in Kosovo. This has to do with winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Aristotle said that relatively small incidents can be the beginning of a larger conflict. A stitch in time saves

Buddhist community. The unresolved Rohingya issue is having its obvious negative fallout in Bangladesh and giving fodder to those with hidden agenda to destabilise Bangladesh.

I call upon the government to take up the Rohingya issue through vigorous diplomacy at the UN, OIC, Asean, EC and bilaterally with Myanmar and seek support of the US, China, India, Japan and other countries. Already, the US and Western countries have been sympathetic to the plight of the stateless Rohingyas. US Secretary of



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State Hillary Clinton personally took up the issue with the Asean leaders during the last Asean summit.

The resolution of twin unresolved CHT conflict and the Rohingya issue would have a positive impact in achieving peace and stability and infusing new confidence into the Buddhist community and other minorities. This would raise the image of Bangladesh in the comity of nations and create conditions for attracting significant foreign investment and spur our Development and progress.

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Too young to wed: End child marriages

ARTHUR ERKEN

TODAY, October 11, 2012, is the first-ever "International Day of the Girl Child!" Last year, the United Nations declared that there should be a day highlighting the special challenges that girls all over the world face, each and every single day. One of those challenges is the constant threat to be married off, at a very young age, often to a much older man! Sadly, for many young girls in Bangladesh, this threat is a constant reality. Studies show that about half of all girls in Bangladesh are married by the age of 16 years, well below the legal age of marriage, which is 18 years.

Shandiza Akter was such a child bride. She was forced to marry at the age of 13 to a much older man. At the time of the wedding, it was agreed that the bridegroom would receive 50 grams of gold and Tk. 20,000 as dowry. Her poor father agreed to the demands. Soon after her wedding, Shandiza found that her husband did not have any job and in fact was involved with drugs smuggling. The cash and the money they received from selling the gold was finished in no-time; this is when the beatings started. Her husband and in-laws demanded more money from her father. She endured the tortures for 9 long years, a teenage girl, trapped in an abusive marriage. In 2010, now with two children, she could no longer take the abuse and the constant demands for more dowry. She left her husband's home and ended up in a government-supported Women Support Centre where she is now seeking justice from the courts.

Unfortunately, Shandiza's story is not at all uncommon in Bangladesh. In fact, marrying young girls off has been common practice for long. And

it is not limited to slums and rural villages. Some 64% of all girls are married before the age of 18 years; it affects 58% of girls in urban areas and 69% in rural areas. Even more disturbing is the fact that Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriages in the world, with 20% of girls becoming wives before their 15th birthday!

Why is the practice of marrying off young girls so widespread? And why didn't the practice hardly change over the years? In many societies, including Bangladesh, there is a widespread belief that being married off somehow guarantees young girls a safe and secure passage to adult-

Bringing greater attention to the situations faced by girls at risk of child marriage and married girls is a must. Child marriage is simply not good socio-economic policy. No country can afford to see the rights, health, and potential of thousands of girls being squandered each day.

hood. Moreover, it is well known that the dowry (or the total sum of money, goods, or estate that a woman or her family is expected to bring into a marriage) increases the older the girl/woman is. This provides a clear incentive to the family of the girl to marry her off at a young age.

But child marriages violate girls' rights, as girls rarely give their free and full consent to marry, it denies them of their childhood, disrupts their education, jeopardises their health, and limits their opportunities. No cultural, religious, or economic rationale for child marriage can possibly justify the damage these marriages do to young girls and their potential. Parents want the best for their children, and therefore need to

support their girls' choices and decisions to marry.

A child marriage doesn't benefit anyone! Rather, when a girl delays marriage, everyone benefits. A girl who marries later is more likely to stay in school, work, and reinvest her income into her family, which helps to lead her family and eventually her community out of poverty. She and her family are more educated and healthier. Crucially, a girl who marries later is more empowered to choose whether, when, and how many children to have. This is important, as child marriages can lead to life-threatening health consequences as

secondary, is the single most important factor associated with age at marriage. Girls especially need social support and access to programmes that provide life skills, literacy, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health information and services. Moreover, many current youth-serving programmes are not reaching the most marginalised adolescent girls who continue to be left out or overlooked. Doing more of the same will continue their marginalisation. We need to make an effort to identify and reach the most vulnerable girls through programmes that are tailored according to their unique circumstances. Also, the needs of married girls and girls at risk of child marriage are largely absent from the development agenda. Therefore, bringing greater attention to the situations faced by girls at risk of child marriage and married girls is a must. Child marriage is simply not good socio-economic policy. No country can afford to see the rights, health, and potential of thousands of girls being squandered each day.

Let me conclude with a quote from the UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin: "Child marriage is an appalling violation of human rights and robs girls of their education, health and long-term prospects. A girl who is married as a child is one whose potential will not be fulfilled. Since many parents and communities also want the very best for their daughters, we must work together and end child marriage!"

On this "International Day of the Girl Child," let us therefore redouble our efforts to end girl child marriages in Bangladesh; they are simply too young to wed! Let girls be girls!

The writer is UNFPA Representative, Bangladesh

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 11

1899

Second Boer War begins: In South Africa, a war between the United Kingdom and the Boers of the Transvaal and Orange Free State erupts.

1912

First Balkan War: The Greek Army liberates the city of Kozani.

1954

First Indochina War: The Viet Minh take control of North Vietnam.

1986

Cold War: U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev meet in Reykjavik, Iceland, in an effort to continue discussions about scaling back their intermediate missile arsenals in Europe.

1987

Start of Operation Pawan by Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka that killed few thousand ethnic Tamil civilians, several hundred Tamil Tigers and few hundred Indian Army soldiers.