

GROUND REALITIES

Youths missing from Aminbazar

Who would account for them?

A series of 'disappearances' have occurred in Aminbazar area of Savar. These have caused quite a stir among the local community. What is even more worrisome is that suspicion of 'disappearances' points to involvement of law enforcement agencies as alleged by affected families. Five young men went missing on October 23 from Bardesi village and families are baffled that although 19 days have elapsed, there is still no trace of them. In another incident on October 10, two individuals belonging to the same village in Aminbazar went missing.

Except for recording a general diary at Darus Salam police station and a written complaint submitted to RAB headquarters, witnesses who have firsthand account of some people being picked up by some unidentified persons coupled with the lukewarm attitude of the police to record "missing" cases is fuelling various speculations and conspiracy theories.

The picking up of people in broad daylight or after dark for that matter can hardly be stated as a normal state of affairs in any civilised society. The usual explanation offered by the police is that certain incidents have not occurred within the jurisdiction of a particular police station and that is why they have to tell the complainants off. This is understandable. But should they not, in that event, direct citizens to the police station that has the jurisdiction? Whatever be the circumstances, it is the duty of law enforcement agencies to register a complaint, particularly of such a serious nature as above.

When the police come on record to state that a certain missing individual is a drug dealer and let it go at that, again, a gross negligence of duty. Even if the person in question has a criminal record, that individual has rights under the law. Using that as a pretext for not recording and investigating a missing case is simply unacceptable.

It is in public interest that the home ministry demands explanation from the Savar police station as to their non-chalance to what constituted a legitimate obligation for them to record and follow up on.

Eight years in Indian jail

Plight of the sculptor and his family warrants explanation

WE have no words to express our utter shock at the way sculptor Rashid Ahmed and his daughter-in-law Nurun Nahar suffered in an Indian jail without trial for some eight years. Had it not been for the exposé in the media and payment of the fines as part of the court sentence by some kind businessmen their release might well have been further delayed.

According to Rashid Ahmed, barring two visits from the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi during the eight years in question, no effective measures were taken in providing legal support to the two Bangladeshis. They needed special attention if only because they were put through the legal system in a country they were visiting.

As the report goes, the tragedy befell them after they checked in a New Delhi hotel while on a pilgrimage to Ajmer in India in December 2004. Indian intelligence officials arrested them on charge of what they alleged carrying fake Indian currency.

One wonders how two Bangladeshi nationals were allowed to languish without trial for such a long time? Add to this the fact that having been involved in the case, they had no access to finance or legal aid.

It appears whereas the Indian authorities treated them with sternness, it was through the kindness of some private citizens that he and his daughter-in-law could taste freedom, even though belatedly.

Now who will compensate for the years lost from the lives of the aging sculptor and his eldest son's wife, whose family members also suffered hardships inordinately? Actually, the man and his family have been rendered pauper after they had to sell their house in Dhaka to meet the contingencies.

The government needs to seek clarification from the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi on the matter and take issue with the Indian authorities so that such incident does not recur in the future.

Meanwhile, some ways may be found to rehabilitate

Romney ... and White House truths



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

AMERICA can sometimes be an intriguing place when it comes to politics. And you notice that especially in a presidential

election year, when candidates sometimes make all those mistakes or come forth with all those bloopers that leave you quite amazed. Last week, it was Mitt Romney's turn to add to election year silliness when he told Americans at his final debate with Barack Obama that Iran was in need of an outlet to the sea through Syria. It did not occur to him that Iran had a huge coastline of its own and hence had absolutely no need of a passage through Syria. Suddenly, to many of us, it was just one more instance of how unprepared some men are when they decide that they must be president of the United States.

In real terms, though, that and some other remarks might in the end not undermine Romney's chances at the election. Americans have, after all, been known to choose some of the unlikeliest of men as presidents, with results that have been none too comfortable for them and for the world at large.

When you look back at the eight years of Ronald Reagan, you get to have a fairly good idea of how politics can be wasted with a shallow politician occupying the White House. Neither Reagan nor his team had anything to inspire the country with, save only their harsh conservatism directed at the communist world. The Reaganites offered a trickle-down economy to the country. Outside America's frontiers, a persistent policy -- or call it conspiracy -- was underway to destabilise Afghanistan through assisting the Mujahideen and Pakistan's Islamist dictator Ziaul Haq. Reagan and the

Pope together did all they could to bring Lech Walesa to power through the fall of communism in Poland.

In a word, the Reagan legacy has been one of causing new turmoil around the globe. That is something you would not have expected his predecessor Jimmy Carter to do. The former governor of Georgia, once he entered the White House in 1977, started off with all the right policies in place. Human rights, he let it be known, would be his administration's priority around the world. The trouble with the times, though, was that they were not favourable for Carter.

Iran's ayatollahs, by seizing US embassy personnel as hostages in 1979, drilled huge holes in his walls. His comment that a malaise was

to contest the results. To his credit, he decided that a legal wrangle would only undermine the presidency. Nixon would come back and win the presidency in 1968. He was one of the three most intelligent men to occupy the White House, the other two being Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, in the twentieth century. His understanding of foreign affairs and of geopolitics was profound. It is true that under him an imperial presidency operated in Washington, but that only showed the strength of leadership in Nixon.

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abroad in America did not help. Even so, he deserved a second term. The electorate did not see things that way. They turfed him out. In America, politicians with a philosophical bent of mind have almost always failed to make it to the top. Think here of the very cerebral Adlai Stevenson, who twice lost the race for the White House to Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s.

Had Americans not fallen for John F. Kennedy's youth and glamour in 1960 and had they concentrated on which of the two men running for the presidency had the better experience of leadership at that point in time, Richard M. Nixon would be president. But, again, one is not quite sure that Kennedy actually won the election, seeing that Chicago mayor Richard Daley had a certain role in manipulating the votes in his city. After the election, Nixon was advised by his lawyers

Palin will long be remembered by Americans and people beyond America. Dan Quayle, vice president under George H.W. Bush, will always be remembered for his misspelling of "potato." A little boy in school spelt it right. The vice president then stepped up to the board and added an 'e' at the end of "potato."

In 1988, Senator Joe Biden went around seeking the Democratic nomination for president through delivering eloquent speeches at his campaign rallies. It was only when someone made the startling discovery that Biden had been memorising the speeches of the late Robert F. Kennedy and passing them off as his own that the prospective candidate dropped out of the race. Years later, he would serve as Barack Obama's vice president.

Going back to Mitt Romney's gaffe over Iran-Syria, you will likely recall the

A Pakistani story

RAFIA ZAKARIA

IN a BBC interview about her novel *The God of Small Things*, Indian author Arundhati Roy was asked a familiar question: "With all your talent and gifts, why do you not choose to tell 'good' stories about our part of the world?"

The implication of the question, cleverly sandwiched as it was between congratulatory phrases about Roy's success as an author, were clear: an Indian author should not expose the cruelties of caste, infidelity, exclusion and emotional silence; she should focus on the rich culture, colourful festivals, stories of henna and mangoes.

Roy's answer was just as clear: "I do not work for the tourism department."

The exchange is instructive for anyone who writes or has considered writing about South Asia, and perhaps also for anyone writing in any of the impoverished corners of deprivation in today's world. In the geographical blindness of the Internet, where every word is accessible to everyone, the task of representation has indeed become a complicated one.

On one side is the glaring burden of the many unarticulated realities, all those secret sins and cruelties that need to be told: the sweeper punished for angering the spoiled millionaires, the women sold as settlements in tribal vendettas or the mentally ill lynched by mobs.

On the other lies the onus of telling the "good" story, to avoid the bristling rebukes of readers such as the one who confronted Roy -- children of a culture uncomfortable with the exposure of the dirt beneath and inside.

The choice is complicated by the realisation that for all inhabitants of impoverished lands who want the "good" story, the raucous celebration of colour, festivity and hospitality which they would like to attach as adjectives to themselves, there are just

as many dwellers in lands of abundance who want the "bad" story.

These readers who live in developed luxury require a slum in a story about India, child soldiers in stories about Sudan, and terrorists in stories about Pakistan. Their expectations for a helpless story, a poor story, are just as oppressive as the demand for a "good" story.

Together the burden of these expectations can cow any writer, since all their choices of topic and complications of character come to represent not something in themselves -- tools for a story or situation -- but devious selections of who one has chosen to please. In the case of Pakistan, thrust into the global spotlight for all the

so happily settled in its patterns, never has there been more of an imperative to rattle an existing discourse and insist on telling a story about neither and both at the same time.

A possible strategy for such a mischievous revolution is to use the strategies of storytellers past. One of these, as exemplified by Charles Dickens in his work on the grim London of the industrial era, was an abandonment of data and an embrace of empathy.

A plethora of facts, figures and the rational argument aped from policy briefs may be good enough strategies for tolerable times, but fall desperately short of invoking anything but apathy in the ones we confront today.

The immigrant workers toiling in a

More than any other time in its existence, Pakistan needs stories: stories that revive the individual, that are geared not to change the mind of the policymaker or the media pundit but the ordinary person who looks and listens and will one day feel.

wrong reasons, these allusions become even more problematic.

A story about child brides in the tribal areas ends up doing all the wrong things. The Pakistani reader will read and lament and, based on the sheer repetition of such realities, move on, perhaps to the news about the latest prodigies with 14 As in their O-level exams -- that is, the "good" stories.

Elsewhere, others will provide just as predictable a response, reading to substantiate their own conclusions: a woman without healthcare in Ohio can feel better thinking about the girl shot by the Taliban for being on a school bus.

Even amid all these vexations, the task of telling the Pakistani story was never more pressing. With either side

meat-packing plant were interesting to no one until Upton Sinclair made them so in *The Jungle*. Perhaps victims of factory fires, burned, mourned and now forgotten, could be revived in the same way. If everyone has abandoned fact then fiction can take up some of its burdens.

Of course, these are all Western examples from Western novels and we are all secure in our aversion to those; but as one Chinese entrepreneur says in the recent book *Factory Girls*, copying can create an empire when it is done with any sense (he ran a school teaching Chinese factory workers just enough office skills to turn them into secretaries).

Perhaps a lesson from the Chinese in using whatever is necessary wherever it may come from in the world is some-

blunder his father George Romney made in 1968 as he sought the Republican nomination for president that year. The elder Romney, then governor of Michigan, toured South Vietnam to see American soldiers in action, was impressed by what the soldiers were doing in combating the Vietcong and came back home to report to his fellow Americans. Only weeks later, he stumbled on the discovery that the war had in fact been going badly for America, that indeed he had been brainwashed by senior US military officials on how "well" American forces were doing in Vietnam. His popularity ratings plunged and he withdrew from the race. The Republicans turned to Richard Nixon, who went on to beat, albeit narrowly, Lyndon Johnson's vice president Hubert Humphrey at the election in November.

American presidents and presidential candidates have often been a curious mix of high intellect, unabashed arrogance and unadulterated philistinism. Andrew Jackson could not spell properly; Herbert Hoover did not waste words talking; Theodore Roosevelt, through his Bull Moose candidacy, was quite the bull in politics; Harry Truman murdered tens of thousands of Japanese in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and felt not at all ashamed of his criminality; John Kennedy made a mess of himself at the Bay of Pigs in 1961; Lyndon Johnson sent 55,000 Americans and triple that number of Vietnamese to death in that long war; Nixon opened up to China and then, through Watergate, opened the floodgates to disaster; George W. Bush went into Iraq illegally with his friend Tony Blair and destroyed a beautiful country.

What if Mitt Romney is really elected president? Let's not even think about it. The idea is depressing.

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

thing Pakistanis can digest.

The present would be a good time to do so. More than any other time in its existence, Pakistan needs stories: stories that revive the individual, that are geared not to change the mind of the policymaker or the media pundit but the ordinary person who looks and listens and will one day feel.

The target for the Pakistani writer is neither the "good" story nor the "bad" story or even perhaps the most accurate story, but rather the story that can break through the calcified armours of denial, apathy and self-interest that perpetuate the Pakistani cult of disinterest.

The Pakistani story, then, is the only rescue not simply for Pakistan but its image in the minds of Pakistanis. When there are too many Pakistani stories to count, of trash heaps that were treasure troves, of falling in love in visa lines, of hailing rickshaws to get to one's own wedding, of teaching a great-grandmother to use a cellphone -- with so many stories there will no longer be any "good" stories or "bad" stories about Pakistan.

In that moment, Pakistan will escape both the insistence of those who wish to hide the dark, the grim and the ambiguous and those that underscore the helplessness, the pain and the poverty. Any story about it will be, simply, a Pakistani story.

The writer is a Pakistani attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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CORRECTION
In the article "China surfs the aluminum waves," printed on October 30, the name of a company was inadvertently given as "BP Billington." Instead, it should be "BHP Billiton." The error is regretted.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 31

1940
World War II: The Battle of Britain ends the United Kingdom prevents a possible German invasion.

1968
Vietnam War October surprise: Citing progress with the Paris peace talks, US President Lyndon B. Johnson announces to the nation that he has ordered a complete cessation of "all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam" effective November 1.

1984
Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is assassinated by two security guards.

1998
Iraq disarmament crisis begins: Iraq announces it would no longer cooperate with United Nations weapons inspectors.