

Ashulia: May it never happen again

TARIQ IQBAL

THIS morning, one of my co-workers showed me the label of his shirt -- it's made in Bangladesh, and smiled, "Look, I am wearing a Bangladeshi shirt!" He did not know about the recent tragedy in Ashulia; I told him about the death of more than hundred working, living, hopeful workers. He was sad, and simply said, "I feel terrible now, feel guilty about holding this shirt in my hand." So am I, and no doubt many others feel the same. Yahoo news article regarding this accident received tremendous amount of response from the readers living in the Western world.

One common question they asked was if the major buyers of the garments industries were (and are) aware of the unsafe working condition of the factories. They also tried to hold some large purchasers like Wal-Mart, Sean-John, etc.; labels partially responsible for the tragedy. Although one can try to split hair about the legal, moral and ethical responsibility of this kind of tragedies that have taken place in Bangladesh's history, the ultimate responsibility lies with the local authorities and owners of the establishments. It's important to address this issue, and warrants open, honest and frequent discussion.

This is not a time for pointing fingers, or making it a political issue, which I am afraid some will certainly try to capitalise on. It's rather a time for reflection and action. What went wrong? What could have been done to prevent this tragedy? What are the risk factors in the existing factories that are operational? What are the best measures to prevent this tragedy and what is the best response if mishap begins to take shape? Those are the most pertinent questions that we should ask. Yes, it's also important to hold concerned parties accountable as per their due, and they should be treated with the harshest statuette of the law. A few suggestions are given below:

First, please ensure a common, mandatory industry standard of safety for all existing factories, irrespective of their individual manufacturing styles. The "Safety First" motto should be promoted, practised and encouraged by all levels of the work force

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involved with garment manufacturing.

Every month, perform safety drills -- fire, earthquake, boiler explosion and such scenarios, and have the drill evaluated by a neutral body, composed of experts properly trained. Encourage employees to participate in safety quizzes, with token incentives like monetary gifts or vacation-time. Managers or supervisors can also be rewarded for the initiatives they take for safety and for each year of mishap free operation.

Each year, Bangladesh faces fire hazards in the garments sector, and it's frustrating, sad and astonishing to know that they have all been preventable fires. Despite repeated requests from concerned citizens who care, governments of past and present hardly took any practical actions to safe-guard the workers from this death trap. The readers worldwide can't understand how a building of any industrial capacity (however small or large) is allowed to function without any fire-escapes. BGMA can't avoid their responsibility either. They should make it mandatory for any new companies or businesses to pass

the fire-safety, and strict building safety code inspections before being offered membership.

Bangladesh government should work closely with International Code Council, an organisation that specialise in global safety codes in all levels of building and structure. Also relevant are the organisations called International Fire Fighters Association (IFFA) and Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA). They all are excellent organisations who can be consulted to initiate a practical, sensible and industry specific programme for fire prevention in the garments sector.

My heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of the victims. Although words or any other forms of condolence won't fill the void, I urge that the survivors receive compensations and their voice be heard in the most compassionate and receptive manner. There are no known records in Bangladesh's legal history of conviction of any kind of any person or organisation to be held accountable for these fire incidences. This total lack of accountability amounts to sheer negligence



towards this country's vital economic interest and it also goes against the basic humanitarian gesture expected of a civilised nation. Repetitive fire incidences not only cause national trauma, it has an international impact. Large, global businesses face the questions these fire incidences raise -- questions about their foreknowledge of poor safety standards, industrial malpractice, their possible encouragement of higher production output under pressure, at the cost of basic safety so common in their home countries. In summary, it questions their corporate ethics and corporate social responsibility. No business organisation wants to face those questions on an annual basis. Wal-Mart itself is facing internal legal battles with employees. If situation in Bangladesh's garments sector remains so disorganised, unsafe, controversial and its manpower so vulnerable to preventable fire mishaps, there is no doubt Bangladesh will lose a significant segment of its earning. No buyer wants to be seen in the global media as a monster who indirectly participates in the death of innocent lives.

So, strict implementation of appropriate fire code and system of accountability in all aspects of safety in the garments sector, are vital not only on the humanitarian ground, but it makes simple and justified economic sense. Please don't ignore it any longer.

I am writing this note, sitting on my floor, wearing a cheap, black, cotton pajama, bought from a local departmental store in USA. It's also made in Bangladesh, like my friend's shirt. Did it pass through the hands of any of the deceased? Did anyone perished in Ashulia fold it with his/her tired hands, so that I can wear it in a country thousands of miles away? Did the same hands grappled through the black smoke, being trapped within the confine of an engulfed building, seeking a way out? I will never know. As the smoke in Ashulia subsides, let our prayers go out to the victims, and let it be a lesson towards safer industrial practice, let put a stop to this yearly saga of death. May we not have to mourn like this again.

Tariq Iqbal writes from USA.

Sheikh Mujib's Unfinished Memoirs

HAMID MIR

of East Pakistan must accept Urdu as their State language. Young Mujib came out on roads on March 11, 1948, against this declaration.

He was not opposing Pakistan. He was only defending his language which was his political right but he was arrested. Mujib was released on January 21, 1949. Muhammad Ali Jinnah was no more and Mujib left the Muslim League.

He joined the newly formed Awami Muslim League under the leadership of Hussain Shaheed Suharwardy. Within five years Awami League swept Muslim League from East Pakistan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won the election from Gopalganj in 1954, taking oath as the provincial minister for Agriculture.

The Muslim League government in centre never accepted its defeat and dismissed the United Front Government in Dhaka. Sheikh Mujib was again arrested.

His memoirs are unfinished but we must accept some historical realities as the ultimate truth in our own interest.

I will not quote any Bangladeshi or Indian writer to point out some historical realities. I will quote only Pakistani writers. When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested in 1954, Army Chief General Ayub Khan was preparing his officers for a military coup. The first Chief of General Staff of Pakistan Army Sher Ali Patodi wrote in his autobiography that Ayub wanted to interfere in politics and had once stated to him: "The bloody politicians and civilians were useless, corrupt and inefficient."

Legislative assembly asked GHQ to increase the recruitment of Bengalis in army. Patodi tried to implement the orders of assembly but Ayub was not interested. When Mujib was writing his memoirs in jail, the former Chief Justice of Pakistan Muhammad Munir was the law minister of the Ayub regime.

He wrote a book *From Jinnah to Zia* in 1979 claiming that Ayub Khan had suggested that he should talk about separation with some influential Bengali leader. One day the Law Minister Munir spoke to a Bengali Minister Ramizudin. His reply was prompt and straight. He asked me whether I was suggesting secession. I said yes or something like confederation or more autonomy. Ramizudin said: "Look here we are the majority province, and it is for the minority province to secede because we are Pakistan."

Why did Ayub dislike Bengalis? Because Bengalis supported Fatima Jinnah against Ayub in the presidential election in early 1965. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the chief polling agent of Fatima Jinnah in Dhaka.

The fact is that it was not Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who wanted to break Pakistan. He only

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demanded provincial autonomy in 50s and 60s, but our military regime tried to silence his voice by throwing him in jail. He never abandoned the political struggle and participated in the first general elections of Pakistan in 1970. Awami League emerged as a majority party but the military regime of General Yahya Khan refused the transfer of power to Awami League. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and a military operation was started.

What happened in this operation? I will quote only few lines from the book *A Stranger in My Own Country* by Major General(R) Khadim Hussain Raja who served in Dhaka between 1969 and 1971. He wrote that on March 10, 1971, Lieutenant General Niazi spoke to senior officers in operations room of Dhaka.

Niazi became abusive and started talking in Urdu. He said: "Main iss haramzadi qaum ki nasal badal donga. Yeh mujhey kia samajh te hain?" He threatened that he would let his soldiers loose on their womenfolk. The next morning a Bengali officer Major Mushtaq went into the bathroom at the command headquarter and shot himself in the head.

I can quote more books by other Pakistani writers who accepted that our soldiers not only massacred Bengali Muslims in big number, but they also followed the orders of General Niazi and raped women. I will stop here.

I just want to say that the Unfinished Memoirs of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the historical evidence that Bengalis never broke Pakistan but they actually created Pakistan.

In fact political intrigues and blunders of military dictators broke Pakistan. We forced Bengalis to take arms in their hands to defend their women. It's time now to apologise officially from people of Bangladesh.

Remember that only brave people accept their mistakes. It's time to show some bravery by accepting our mistakes and apologising to Bangladeshis. Our apology will not weaken Pakistan but will strengthen Pakistan.

Revealed: Lift Lurker in the flesh



AT last it can be revealed. Lift Lurker is Vince Alcalde -- a software developer who was born and grew up in Manila, but now lives and works as a technology consultant in Australia. He has three children.

Here's the full story. Vince started posting items as comments on this website under his real name several years ago, probably about 2008.

In those days, the most popular commenters were Grandpa -- Christian Fardel, an aviation specialist from the Caribbean, and Angela Sias, a copyeditor from Singapore.

Much of the discussion revolved around the various challenges faced by members of the group -- Angela keeping her love life in order, and in particular, Fardel as an airport official.

Then Vince decided to comment on Grandpa Fardel's tales of aviation. The software engineer said: "One day I realised that Lifts are a form of transportation, and that I had never heard of lifts crashing and killing their passengers. So on a whim, I posted a message saying that the safest form of transport is the lift, not the airplane. And that started the still ongoing battle with Grandpa."

This gave rise to several posts and articles purely about elevators such as this one. And Liftie made lots of major contributions to the main column as well.

Lift Lurker actually ended up writing a guest column, much of which he sent goading Grandpa Fardel.

But the curious thing is that Vince was never the funny kid at school, nor is he the life and soul of dinner parties. "I don't think I was funny. I'm pretty quiet and not the life of any party. I just go for the free food and drinks," he said. "Remember Bob Bob? You'd probably notice him before me."

Bob Bob was the world's most boring person, a creation of Lift Lurker.

Mr. Jam: To write funny stuff every day or two is hard work: does it come easy?

Vince: Sometimes it just comes. But many times, I have to work at it. I'd read your latest column and consider various angles and resolve to extend it further. It is gratifying to be able to come up with something funny. I guess that's how composers and writers feel. However, it is hard and it affects the brain irreversibly. Half the time what I come up is not funny enough and then I don't post it.

Mr. Jam: He has a very strange accent. Where does he come from?

Vince: He lives in Liftuania, which is 'West of the Equator'. His mother tucked him in a bread basket and left him at the door of an orphanage when he was 15 years old or so. He believes Christian Fardel is his long lost grandpa. He hates airplanes and his greatest grief is that his genius daughter keeps a photo of an Airbus under her pillow.

For more on lift dramas, visit [vittachi at: http://www.mrjam.org](http://www.mrjam.org)