

INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION DAY

Anti-corruption and people's engagement: The Bangabandhu way?

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ON December 9, 2003, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) was opened for signature by member states of the UN. To commemorate this occasion, and to create greater awareness, participation and commitment of governments and peoples to combat corruption around the world, December 9 was declared as International Anti-Corruption Day (IACD).

The Convention subsequently came into force in 2005, with 164 states including Bangladesh as parties to it. IACD has been observed by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) from 2004 when demand for Bangladesh's ratification of the Convention was first raised. Bangladesh acceded to UNCAC in 2007.

Soon after coming to power the present government adopted an implementation plan of the Convention. In 2011 Bangladesh also underwent a review of implementation for which the government also cooperated with peer countries (Iran and Paraguay) and TIB for a parallel review.

These can be viewed as examples of the realisation by the government that corruption is a key national challenge, and that to confront it institutional and policy environment must be created consistent with UNCAC commitments. This also reflects the expectations of everyone who shares a vision of Bangladesh in which government, politics, business, civil society and daily lives of the people would be free of corruption.

As we observe IACD this year I am reminded of a statement by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In what was reportedly his last public statement made on the Independence Day of 1975, he said: "I had called upon you (on March 7, 1971) to build fortresses in every house ... the number one priority is to root out corruption from the Bangla soil. I need your help ... I will enforce law, I will not spare anybody ... there has to be a people's movement ... It has to be a movement to socially boycott the bribe-taker and the corrupt. ... Who can do it? My student-brothers can do it, the youth can, intellectuals can, the people can... you have to convert each house into a fortresses ... this time fortresses against corruption, so that we can alleviate the sufferings of the toiling masses of Bangladesh" (translated from <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/mushfic1975/29658812>)

A close look at this statement shows how much it is consistent with the spirit of UNCAC. He talks about punishing the corrupt, which needs adequate laws and effective institutions; he emphasises on challenging impunity without fear or favour and sparing none. As the firmest ever believer in people's power he calls for a people's movement in the way he inspired and led our glorious independence movement. Tragically, Bangabandhu was not allowed to survive long enough to fulfill his vision of a corruption-free Bangladesh.

As much as it is a sheer coincidence that the IACD is observed in the month of our victory, it also gives us reasons to recall that the spirit of our independence is absolutely antithetical to anything to do with corruption -- abuse of power for private gain. Perhaps also by a coincidence, the 2008 election manifesto of the party he left behind, led by his daughter Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in many ways captured the same spirit when it identified anti-corruption as a top priority and made over a dozen specific pledges that could strengthen the capacity of the government to control corruption effectively.

Some notable steps were taken too. The Parliament started off well -- in an unprecedented initiative, all parliamentary committees were formed in the very first session, some of which have been active, though conflict of interest remained a key predicament against delivery. Expectations of an effective Parliament were shattered from the first session as a result of boycott by the opposition, who have by now abstained from 80% of working hours of the House.

Among many important laws enacted is the Right

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to Information Act, followed by the Whistleblower Protection Act, which, if effectively enforced, can go a long way in corruption control. The Information Commission was set up and the Human Rights Commission was reconstituted, raising expectations. The government has taken a few other positive initiatives like anti-corruption training of officials in institutions funded by public money. The second generation Citizen's Charter is being widely encouraged. Local level IT-supported information centres coupled with initiatives consistent with the vision of digital Bangladesh such as introduction of e-governance and e-procurement, limited though, have opened opportunities for improvement in the corruption situation in service delivery in relevant sectors.

At the macro level the National Integrity Strategy is awaiting adoption soon. However, numerous steps were also taken that weakened the national integrity system. There has been a series of efforts to curtail the independence and effectiveness of the Anti-Corruption Commission, upon which depends a lot in terms of delivery of corruption control.

Although the government reportedly moved away

from the restrictive provisions and a revised law is under consideration that may be more conducive, the revised version has not been made public, nor has it been formally introduced in the parliament.

In the meantime, not only were thousands of criminal and corruption cases withdrawn under political consideration, initiative was also taken to provide legal authority of such withdrawal in the hands of the government, which could have a crippling effect on the ACC and undermine the judicial process. Institutional capacity to control corruption and promote accountable governance has been undermined by deepening of politicisation of administration and law enforcement.

No progress has been made in terms of the commitment to annual disclosure of income and wealth statement of parliament members, ministers and respective families. Abuse of power related to public contracts, illegal grabbing of land, water bodies, forest and khas land by the leaders, agents and activists of political leaders have continued unabated.

Public procurement rules were amended to provide that no expertise or experience would be needed for bidding for contracts up to a certain threshold. Equally damaging for the prospect of controlling corruption was the immunity granted to decisions in the power sector. The same is true for the Telecommunication Act 2010 that curtailed the authority of the BTRC to the advantage of the ministry. Nothing was done to keep the commitment to establish the Ombudsman's office.

Contrary to electoral commitment and spirit of the Constitution additional powers were granted to the members of Parliament at the expense of the authority of the local government. Another step defying the Constitutional provision and electoral commitment is the provision in successive budgets to legalise the black money which, for all practical purposes encourages corruption and serves as a disincentive against honest living. These are indications of possible policy capture by forces who benefit from corruption rather than those who would like it to be controlled.

To cap it all, there has been a procession of high profile corruption allegations like Padma Bridge, Railway scam, Stock Market, Hall-Mark and Destiny. As Padma bridge case has amply demonstrated, a section of the government, appearing to be hostage to a denial syndrome, has too often failed to demonstrate the commitment and capacity to allow investigations in the due process without favour or fear.

Nevertheless, as we observe IACD, we remain optimistic today, a few days before the Victory Day, that Bangladesh can achieve much more in corruption control if we remain respectful to the spirit of our independence and draw inspiration and commitment from Bangabandhu's call, especially from the way he articulated the anti-corruption strategy.

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HORROR OF ACID VIOLENCE CONTINUES TO HAUNT WOMEN

The need to look beyond legislation



The United Nations in Bangladesh and The Daily Star have joined hands to raise awareness on violence against women, as part of the UN Secretary General's global UNiTE campaign. This is part 5 of a series of articles that will appear in The Daily Star until December 10, focusing on the context, the policy interventions, and the actions needed in combating violence against women in Bangladesh.

PASCAL VILLENEUVE

DESPITE enforcement of strict laws, acid violence continues to haunt women and children in Bangladesh. Most of these horrific incidents happen because of land disputes, rejection of marriage proposals and declarations of love or denial of sexual advances made by men.

From 1999 to 2011, more than 3,000 victims of acid attacks and over 3,300 survivors were recorded by the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), which is the only organisation of its kind in Bangladesh. It provides medical, psychosocial, legal and rehabilitation services for victims as well as focusing on prevention to change this harmful practice. ASF also gives technical support to victims to cope with the situation by bolstering their

self-esteem through psycho-social counselling.

Perpetrated with targeted vengeful motives, acid attacks are conscious attempts to deface and disfigure people, especially girls and women, for life. The horror of acid violence goes much beyond its physical manifestation. It leaves a severe impact on the victim who sometimes faces lifelong psychosocial trauma and social isolation, further damaging her self-esteem and confidence to live a normal professional and personal life.

Unicef, as part of building a child-sensitive social protection and child protection system, is providing ASF technical and financial support for improving services at the community level by establishing protection mechanisms and psychosocial support, and mobilising role models through survivor ambassadors to work for social norm change. It is also working to bring survivors and their families under social protection initiatives to build their resilience through case management, cash transfer, stipend and self-development and job placements while considering their best interests, protection and social reintegration.

Legal sanction against acid violence

The government of Bangladesh, acknowledging the seriousness of the situation, enacted laws to contain this heinous crime. Two major legal instruments are the Acid Control Act 2002 which regulates and controls the import, export, sale and use of acids, and the Acid Crime Control Act which imposes life imprisonment or the death penalty on perpetrators and a speedy trial of 90 days.

The National and District Acid Control Councils promote immediate action after a crime, and control the sale and use of the substance without authorisation.

Organisations promoting the rights of women

and children have a role to play in activating Acid Control Committees, in order to create greater links with Child Protection Networks and to support the filing of Public Interest Litigation to build evidence for the punishment of acid attacks, thus creating better law enforcement.

The government has improved the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital with facilities to provide treatment for acid survivors, and trained doctors who offer care beyond the support provided by ASF. This type of structure also needs to be established within communities so that victims are treated as quickly as possible.

Community-based protection

The protective environment can be significantly strengthened through community mobilisation, life skills based education, child development, and child rights training. To help reduce harmful practices and encourage positive social norms among adolescent boys, we need to engage people who have the power to influence decisions and promote positive change.

As part of its child protection programme, Unicef will continue to support ASF and other actors to empower victims of acid violence through an integrated and holistic approach, by strengthening community-based support systems. Once established, such systems can be replicated and taken to scale across Bangladesh with support from development partners. However, the effectiveness of these systems will be compromised without a functional justice system and full implementation of the law.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

The land of the free?



THE officer glanced at my passport, stamped it and returned it with a smile. As I walked out into the Mediterranean sun, I could hardly believe that immigration and customs formalities in Rome's DaVinci airport were completed in less than half an hour. Most importantly, I had not felt the anxiety and tension that have become part of my travel pains each time I re-enter Washington, Dulles, from an overseas trip. There were no intrusive questions about the purpose of my trip or what countries I had recently visited! Here I was in one of the most romantic and historical cities of the world and I had started off on the right foot. I felt Rome stretching its friendly arms, saying: "The Eternal City invites you to enjoy and relax!"

In fact, there is something about Southern Europe that prompts you to slow down. From the effusive coffee drinkers in the cafes to the strolling pedestrians in the busy avenues, no one is in a rush. You are not pushed and shoved because everyone seems to be enjoying the leisurely moment rather than dashing to the next appointment! Waiters in restaurants don't hover around, pressurising you to vacate the table for the next customer. My experiences as a resident in East Europe and frequent interactions with Europeans have confirmed that they attach a high premium to leisure. They seem to be content with small cars or the public transport and relatively small living spaces but yearn for more free time.

Coming from the United States, where the pace of life in large urban towns is hectic, to say the least, the freedom to enjoy the little pleasures of life was for me somewhat novel, actually refreshing. The smooth train journey to Venice (with no jarring cell phone conversations), the picturesque drive to Positano on the Amalfi coast, the leisurely walks along quaint streets lined with aesthetically decorated shops reminded me that life is not only about running after ambitious, time-bound projects but enjoying the simple things that happen just by chance!

Of course, I must pay a special tribute to our hosts Iqbal and Neeman Sobhan for sharing with my husband and me the uninhibited spirit of Rome which they have imbibed. Mornings and afternoons were spent in sight seeing or relaxed, intimate conversations. In the evenings our hosts took us on exploratory journeys for tasting exquisite Italian cuisine, which can only be

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described in Elizabeth Gilbert's (*Eat, Pray and Love*) words: "If they don't serve this kind of thing in heaven, then I really don't want to go there!"

Like all good things, the Roman Holiday ended! On board the United flight back to Washington, I started experiencing the anxiety which I always feel before arriving at a US airport. Even though I have never had a bad experience (like being taken to the secondary inspection line) the very prospect that it might happen creates unwarranted tension! The anticipatory hassle and sometimes long interrogations by customs and immigrations in this country have been a real turn-off for many intending travelers. My friends from Bangladesh take holidays in Europe and the Far East each year but they now rarely visit America. One of them told me bluntly: "The US visa process takes 6-9 months, but that is not a guarantee for a smooth passage through the immigration. Sometimes officers pose the same questions that you were asked at the Embassy visa desk. Besides, there is a high likelihood that a traveler's luggage is put through special examination, which means a long wait and a disheveled suitcase! I really can't take this harassment."

Initially, I was a bit upset at her criticism. But now that I have returned from my Italian sojourn, there was this lurking feeling that she might have a point. Post September 11, the United States has changed dramatically from a welcoming and friendly country to one virtually gripped by fear and suspicion, bordering paranoia. It's no longer what it used to be even a decade ago -- welcoming to different ethnicities, religions and opinions! Americans have become increasingly suspicious of other nations and cultures, which is surprising given that it's a country of immigrants! Unfortunately, this hostility is fanned by some politicians and the media constantly droning about the "foreign" threat to national security!

Europe has not been immune to security threats and terrorist plots but it has dealt with the situation with equanimity and maturity. As a result, there is no pervading sense of panic and people are more relaxed. Perhaps we, Americans, need to ask ourselves: Are we safer as a result of the increased surveillance? Is it worth giving up our liberties for security, especially because security alone, without freedom and liberty, does not constitute a free and democratic nation?

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