

GROUND REALITIES

JS body on Tazreen Fashions fire probe

Wrangling won't help; action needed

THE parliamentary standing committee on labour has dismissed BGMEA's probe into Tazreen Fashions fire, the worst of its kind in Bangladesh's history, as biased since it amounts to shielding the factory owner from blame.

Surprisingly, the investigation into the fire carried out by the government echoed the view of the BGMEA that it was a premeditated act.

We note with concern that after six weeks of the tragedy, the probes have not led us anywhere. We are still wrangling over semantics and looking for some excuses to shift the blame for the tragedy.

In either case, the investigating authority points to an invisible quarter for the tragedy without taking the trouble of identifying the agent involved in the purported sabotage.

The fire and the probes give rise to more questions than answer.

All concerned in the factory admitted that the fire alarm did ring. Why was then workers not allowed to leave the building immediately? Why were the floor managers preventing the workers from fleeing building in the face of danger? These questions beg answers.

Second, why was the ground floor where all the staircases of the building met was made impassable by turning it into a warehouse? These are genuine concerns waiting to be addressed.

The cumulative failures, instances of neglect and callousness need to be probed as well.

Worst of all, as the company did not maintain any database of its workers, quite a number of families of the victims, who got burnt beyond recognition, could not be compensated.

This is a stunning instance of callousness on the management's part which leads a group of industries and whose business connections span the globe!

All we are interested in is to see the truth come out and sufficient measures taken to address security anomalies, besetting many garment industries.

Govt. decision to form river commission

Welcome, but requires statutory power

ENVIRONMENTALISTS have long been pressing the government to form a single body with statutory powers to halt and prevent the systematic destruction of rivers and water bodies in the country. At long last, a National River Protection Commission is being formed to oversee prevention of river grabbing and pollution by unscrupulous but powerful elements. The Commission will submit a yearly report to the government with a set of recommendations on the best course of action on tackling such issues. The new body will only have advisory and recommendatory role and will not have any decisive say in matters of implementation.

This unfortunately falls far short of expectations. For years, greedy realtors and other crooked business interests have taken advantage of weak regulatory laws, rules and lack of implementing authorities to play havoc with the aqua ecosystems throughout the country. Although on paper, the National River Protection Commission Act, 2013 will help authorities to take legal steps against parties found guilty of encroachment, pollution and other acts that threaten rivers or water bodies, unless the Commission is adequately empowered and can act independently, it can't take the fight to the perpetrators. It is ironic to say that the environmental group that moved for a Commission through a writ in the High Court in 2009 was not consulted at the time of formulating the Act. Although the Commission will have a complement of a full secretariat of one chairman, four members, including a hydrologist, environmental expert and lawyer, one tends to doubt the efficacy of such a body.

There is no contesting the fact that protecting rivers and tributaries in Bangladesh has become a matter of national importance today. Shortage of water is a global phenomenon, more so in the country since adequate regulatory safeguards have been missing. The disappearances of water systems are leading to frequent flooding and drought. What had been hoped for and what various environmental groups have been advocating for is a single authority equipped with powers to effectively counter encroachers and polluters. The proposed commission as per the outlines given does not seem to be equipped to



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT is always healthy reflecting on stories of men who have in their diverse ways made an impact on our lives. And the reason we do that is plain

history, that very special part of life, of scholasticism we tend to ignore in these times of banalities aplenty. The problem with globalisation, with material prosperity, is that it deprives people of their sense of inquiry as also their understanding of the world they are part of.

In all this quest for economic progress, for nations to come together in the name of beneficial investment, one loses touch with the finer aspects of life, indeed with the incidents and events that have traditionally added substance to the imagination. Literature has been replaced by linguistics; and the study of history has been pushed aside in favour of education that promises swiftly-obtained and well-paying jobs to the young. The scope for intellectual attainment, for pursuits of the scholarly, only gets increasingly narrower in these laid-back post-modern times.

You ask the young about the contributions made to history by Willy Brandt, that extremely admirable politician who left office as West German chancellor in 1974. The chances are that those at whom the question has been put will have no clue to what you wish to extract out of them. Brandt -- and this is for the young as also many among the generation preceding theirs -- is remembered in history for the groundbreaking steps he took, once he became chancellor in 1969, in initiating détente in Europe.

Brandt went on a visit to East Berlin to meet East German Chancellor Willy Stoph (in the Cold War, Germany remained segmented into a capitalistic Federal Republic of Germany and a

communist German Democratic Republic) in 1970 and so inaugurated what was to become known as Ostpolitik. Willy Brandt was also the first German leader to travel to Israel and kneel before the Yad Vashem memorial in penitence for the horrors visited upon the Jewish community in Nazi Germany.

Before Brandt there was Dag Hammarskjöld, whose stewardship of the United Nations as its secretary general was to bring about a change in the working of the global body.

Hammarskjöld was not to handle the position of secretary general as a clerical job, but would go into resolute action in having his views of the world made known to others. He was not intimidated by Nikita Khrushchev when the Soviet leader demanded his scalp. Neither was he to stay home in safety (as Kofi Annan was to do over Rwanda -- and that was in 1994, before the Ghanaian took over as UN chief), a fact borne out by the crisis in the Congo.

Hammarskjöld, a profound thinker whose writings have an indelible touch of the spiritual in them, went headlong into trying to prevent the Congo from falling apart only months into gaining its independence in 1960. On one of his missions to the fractured country in 1961, his aircraft came down in rain and thunderstorm. Hammarskjöld's body was found in a field, his hand holding on to a blade of grass. His successors at the UN have rarely lived up to his standards. Their intellectual failings have been quite baffling.

There was an intellectual in Richard Nixon, despite Watergate and despite his Pakistan tilt in 1971. His journey to

Beijing in February 1972 was a poignant moment in history, not merely because it marked a dramatic thaw in Sino-American relations but also because it was a traditionally anti-communist politician, which Nixon was, making the move.

The US president's expertise in foreign affairs had prepared him well for his meetings with Mao Zedong and Zhou En-lai. It takes courage for a politician to go halfway around the world to make amends with other politicians, those they have always

regarded as enemies. In Beijing, Nixon extended his hand to Zhou En-lai, the urbane intellectual whose move for a handshake with John Foster Dulles at the Geneva conference in 1954 had been rudely spurned by the latter. History interested Nixon, which is why he was hugely impressed with Charles de Gaulle's sweeping discourse on World War Two when the

two men met in Paris in 1969.

One other global figure not afraid to turn his back on old prejudices was Egypt's Anwar Sadat. His courage manifested itself in the way he consolidated his hold on power after succeeding Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. It was demonstrated again in the Yom Kippur war in October 1973, a strategy that forced Israel into negotiating with him. But perhaps no show of courage can be greater than Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 to seek peace with Israel. His Arab allies shunned him in consequence; and his own soldiers murdered him in 1981. Yet it was Sadat's willingness to meet the hard-liner Menachem Begin in 1977 that was to pave the way for future peace moves in the Middle East.

Studies of history in modern times

will remain incomplete without mention of Alexander Dubcek. Taking over from Antonin Novotny as the leader of the Czechoslovak communist party in early 1968, Dubcek went into the job of what he called giving communism a human face. Thus was Prague Spring made to blossom, but only briefly. The Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies crushed it in August 1968, forced Dubcek out and sent him off, first to Turkey as ambassador and then deep inside Czechoslovakia as a forest officer. In the event, the sparks set off by Prague Spring would not die out, as the Velvet Revolution of Vaclav Havel in the late 1980s would prove. In a new Czechoslovakia, a resurrected Dubcek became speaker of the national assembly. He died in a car crash in 1992.

You can blame Mikhail Gorbachev for the mess he made of the Soviet Union in the six years he was in power between 1985 and 1991. But you do have to give him credit for being the first Soviet leader to acknowledge the depths into which Lenin's country had fallen. Its politics operated in a time warp, its economy was in chaos, and its people yearned for liberty. Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost could not withstand the shocks of the change he wished to bring about, but they did free his people into fresh sunlight. Gorbachev's politics would have no room for a Sakharov to suffer in internal exile, for a Solzhenitsyn to leave the country, for Soviet soldiers to die in futile wars abroad.

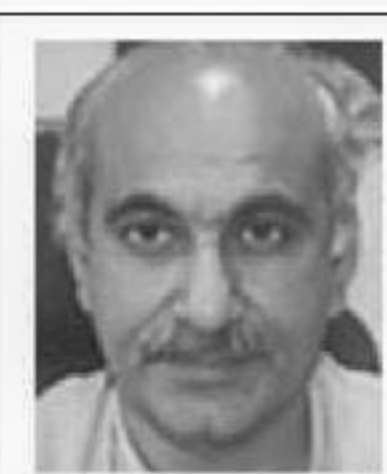
And, in these present times, there is Paul Kagame in Rwanda. His leadership, at once firm and somewhat authoritarian and yet forward-looking, has transformed a country which in 1994 was symbolic of death and destruction in light of what the Hutus had done to the Tutsis. Men like Kagame and Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and Eritrea's Issaia Afewerki symbolise hope for the future.

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: ahsan.syedbadrul@gmail.com

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BYLINE

You can expect an Xmas tree, not a budget



M.J. AKBAR

NOTHING quite grips human ambition as forcefully as the allure of luck. Even Napoleon wanted lucky generals in preference to merely brilliant ones.

Logic is not an impediment; superstition leaps across paradox. In Bangkok, Thais pray at the Tree of 100 Corpses for a number that will win the lottery. Many Chinese gamblers believe in the glorious tradition that red underpants bring fortune in a casino. They also avoid the main entrance, and postpone their date with the table if they encounter a monk or a nun on the way. This last bit makes sense. God wants us to lose money paying taxes, not rolling dice.

Elections are always a gamble, and this year, Indian democracy will become the most active casino in the world, with 10 assembly polls. The stakes will vary: a lifetime's earnings at roulette, medium-sized bets at blackjack, and lots of zing at pinball machines. Perhaps Indian politicians should switch to red underpants. It can't hurt. And if they are careful, no one will notice.

The monster question is whether 2013 will include the next general elections: that three-card flush played mostly blind, with unlimited stakes, at an exclusive high table.

Most of us take a quick look at rickets in the UPA coalition and come to

the wrong conclusion. Allies will not determine the date of the next election. They are all suffering from fifty shades of impotence. Mulayam Singh Yadav is becalmed in a self-constructed prison; Karunanidhi may be teetering on the edge of a cliff, but believes this is still slightly better than a coffin in an abyss. Sharad Pawar is neither here with the Congress nor there with the opposition, so the Congress treats him with either an

take a year at least to unwrap presents and smell the coffee, so wait till 2014.

Pragmatists point out that time is a treacherous ally. They worry that the voter might discover that the Christmas tree is sparkling with tinsel rather than gold. The first of the bonanza series, the direct-cash-transfer scheme, is already suffering from over-exposure and undernourishment. Cash sticks at every stop between source and destination,

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indifferent shrug or a patronising pat.

An internal debate is raging between the Diehard School of Survival and Pragmatists who are more keen to minimise losses, since there is little question of maximising gains. The Diehards have one good argument.

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which is why America gives nearly 50 million citizens food stamps, not cash. But this methodology cannot possibly serve Indians below the poverty line. The day India's banking infrastructure includes the half billion under or around the poverty line, we will also have eliminated poverty. Poverty is the absence of surplus. Nor do IoUs work each time. IoUs need to be backed by credibility.

Pragmatists want a general election after the Karnataka polls, where Congress should do well; and before elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi, where they see little hope for it. The ruling party

could seek a mandate even without passing the budget, which would relieve it of the onerous necessity of wooing both Mulayam and Mayawati. The median date would be a September-October election.

Diehards warn, ominously, that only Indira Gandhi succeeded in a pre-emptive election, and as far back as in 1971. Atal Behari Vajpayee called an election six months before it was due for all the right reasons, quite forgetful of the fact that the wrong ones are scripted in subdued fine print, waiting to surprise you on polling day. Wait till the end; who knows when, and why, luck could turn.

Neither side of this argument has, however, yet begun to address a more significant problem in Congress. Unlike 2009, there is no continuity in the narrative this time, either in leadership or policy. 2009 offered the image of Dr. Manmohan Singh, the promise of electricity through the nuclear power deal, and greater overall prosperity. Each turned out to be mirage. Rahul Gandhi was meant to have occupied the space vacated by a vanishing Singh; instead, he too vanishes whenever there is a crisis. Instead of an economic policy programme that needs a mandate, we have last-minute shopping from a tawdry sale.

It needs more than luck to elect a vacuum.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today and Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 9

1991 Representatives from the United States and Iraq meet at the Geneva Peace Conference to try to find a peaceful resolution to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

2005 Mahmoud Abbas wins the election to replace Yasser Arafat as President of the Palestinian National Authority. He replaces interim president Rawhi Fattouh.

CORRECTION

In the column This Day in History printed on January 8, the year in the item on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's release from prison in Pakistan was incorrectly printed as 1978. Instead it should be 1972. The error is regretted.