

Rising violence against women

A strong coalition and a united voice needed to fight it

THE steady rise in crimes against women in our country, particularly rape, has not been met with the expected level of social outcry as, for example, was the case in India, triggered by the event in Delhi, recently. Besides the crimes making news headlines rather regularly and a handful of protests held by some civil society groups, the issue is yet to find a place in large-scale public debate and on the agenda of lawmakers. According to reports compiled by women's rights organisations, over 5,500 women were subjected to violence last year alone, with the reported statistics being presumably much lower than the actual number of incidents. Nothing short of a full-scale movement can change the situation.

Violence against women continues despite a host of laws against repression of women, domestic violence, acid violence, dowry, etc. It is thus obvious that laws are not enough. A thorough investigation must be conducted on the causes behind violence against women, how and why it continues to occur, and even increase, despite a multitude of laws, and what the cost is to the victims and the consequences for the perpetrators.

As with any other social problem, here, too, awareness is key. The awareness that will not disregard the first signs of sexual harassment as 'eve-teasing' which often snowballs into cases of rape or suicide; the consciousness that will provide moral and social support to victims instead of blaming them; that will rise above the stigma of sexual abuse and issues of shame and honour and persist in the battle for justice.

We have enough laws -- it is the loopholes that need to be addressed and the laws effectively implemented. It is now high time that civil society, children's, women's and human rights organisations form a coalition to fight off the ever-growing menace of violence against women. Protests are not enough; concrete steps should be taken, as are being contemplated in India, through mobilisation of all social forces behind the cause for crushing this scourge.

A lawmaker indeed

He must be made to account for his action

AW was violated on several counts by one whose job it is to legislate new laws. The act of an AL MP from Bagmara exposes a dismal picture of the level of moral degradation, scant respect for law and protection of criminals by the politically powerful.

What should one make of an instance where a convicted person, charged and sentenced by a mobile court for pursuing an illegal business in the form of an unlicensed brick kiln, is snatched by a local MP from police custody. The owner was fined last year for running the same kiln illegally.

This is a preposterous act, simply unheard of, and in any other law abiding country where there is rule of law the lawmaker would have been held to account for his action. Regrettably, an act of impeding the course of law has apparently met with helpless diffidence from all concerned.

The process of law has been impeded in many ways, and each of these is a cognisable offence. Firstly, the said legislator from Rajshai - 4 Constituency tried to influence the process of law by asking the magistrate not to convict the accused. Secondly, having failed to do that, he took away the accused from police custody, the presiding magistrate having taken shelter with the UNO, having been threatened by the MP with dire consequences for not acceding to his 'orders.'

It is not a secret that local MPs have been known to influence the administration from time to time, but this blatantly unlawful act, an MP rooting for an offender, has set a very bad precedent which should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. No body is above the law and the Speaker as well as the law enforcing agencies must take cognizance of this illegal act. The legislator

Saving the Mekong River



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

STRETCHING 4,880km, the Mekong transcends national boundaries that include five riparian countries: Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Multiple planned projects have been floated to dam its waters to produce hydroelectricity in the lower Mekong basin. The successful execution of these projects would see putting into place some 70 dams in operation by 2030.

The Xayaburi dam site is located in northern Laos. Environmentalists have termed the project as particularly harmful from an ecological point of view. Despite opposition, the Lao government awarded the contract to a Thai contractor for \$3.8 billion. Indeed, new contracts were announced in November, 2012. According to *The Diplomat* "the dams will feed a hydropower plant on two tributaries of the Se Kong River, just 100 kilometres from Laos' southern border with Cambodia. The Se Kong flows into the Mekong from the Bolaven Plateau which then feeds into the Lower Mekong Delta."

Laotian policymakers hope to turn the landlocked nation into an electricity powerhouse by damming the Mekong. The plan is to feed the region from hydroelectricity. However, the water resources sprouting from the Mekong are not for Laos to enjoy alone and this brought the government into confrontation with other lower maritime basin (LMB) countries like Vietnam and Cambodia. It brought condemnation from non-governmental platforms such as the

"Focus on the Global South," a member of the 263 coalition of NGOs from 51 nations. In July, 2012 Laos, in what appeared to be taking a step back from brinkmanship, announced suspension of work on Xayaburi dam until further impact assessment studies were done. Studies undertaken independently all point to a grave picture for food security in the region if water is diverted for power generation. The study prepared by the International Center for Environmental Management (ICEM) for the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has found ample evidence of environmental degradation.

Although the Xayaburi dam project has been put on hold, Laos continues to advocate for its construction. Cambodia has asked that the issue not be part of the discussions due to be held in Bangkok on MRC later this week. According to *The Bangkok Post*, ten more dams are planned on the Lower Mekong, mostly in Laos. Activists may have won a temporary respite but the fight to build the dam remains a policy priority for a number of countries.

It is easy to understand why Laos is so focused on dam building. From what has been stated in the "Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower of the Mekong Mainstream" final report prepared for the MRC and published in October, 2010, the economic boom that will come "if all 12 mainstream projects were to go ahead, Lao PDR would receive 70% of export revenues (\$2.6 billion/year) generated by the mainstream dams, with Cambodia receiving 30% (\$1.2 billion/year). Lao PDR would benefit most, primarily because of the number of projects located there. The

Upper Lao cluster (Pak Beng to Pak Chom) represents two-thirds of the national power benefit. During the period of the hydropower concessions, the bulk of those benefits for Lao PDR and Cambodia would not accrue to the country as a whole or the respective governments -- they would accrue to the developers and financiers of the projects. The same is true of export revenues. While significant, net revenues for host governments are less than the large gross revenue and power benefit figures suggest. They are likely to be between 2631% of gross revenues during the period of the concession agreement.

Lao PDR and Cambodia would be unable to construct these projects without private investment. After the likely 25-year concession period has finished and the ownership of the projects is transferred to the host countries the total financial benefit of these projects will accrue to the host countries. In Lao PDR, the use of hydropower revenues to fund infrastructure and social development expenditures (including rural roads, health and education spending) is already mandated in National Socio-economic Development Plan and National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategies."

The flipside to this rosy picture is also included in the same document: "In the short to medium term poverty would be made worse by any one of the mainstream projects, especially among the poor in rural and urban riparian areas. Fishers, in particular, are over represented in poor and vulnerable LMB communities which would be affected by fisheries losses. Poorer households would also be adversely affected by the direct impacts of hydropower development including resettlement, loss of land, and impacts during the contraction period. Loss of fisheries and associated proteins would lead to declines in nutritional health in LMB populations, particularly in Cambodia and Lao PDR where up to 30% of the national protein supply would be at risk if all mainstream dams were to go ahead. These food security issues are likely to affect both the rural and urban poor." It is hence little wonder that the strategic options to be looked at by LMB countries included no building of mainstream dams and a 10-year deferral of all Mekong mainstream dams in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam pending further studies.

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DEATH ANNIVERSARY

Remembering a visionary

ASIF SALEH and TASNEEM SALEH

HOW do we evaluate our heroes and visionaries? Perhaps by their actions.

Defined broadly, a visionary is one who can envision the future and acts upon it by creating the foundation for it. They are the instigators or catalysts for many great things. They are risk takers.

In 1990, the future was there would be a modern, upright English newspaper that would speak of a newly democratic Bangladesh. In 2000, the future was that private television would change the face of media and politics as we know it in Bangladesh. Or how about betting on an individual? In late '80s, the future was that a great film maker would rewrite Bangladesh's film history or was it on a young cameraman who would redefine videography as we know it.

There is one common thread in all of these four elements -- the contribution of a man, whom many from the new generation may not know, called Aby Sayeed Mahmud. We'd like to call him the visionary. Because he saw the future. Through publishing *The Daily Star* and building a magic team in the '90s and later on by creating the

magic dynamism of Ekushey TV, he played the role of the man who created the future. Through financing the first film, *Adam Surat* by then unknown, young, aspiring film maker, Tareq Masud, or arranging training in Germany for a young cameraman, Mishuk Munir, he bet on the young talents of the future.

It was youth that he banked on all his life. He didn't just talk about it but firmly bet on them as well. He created institutes and a culture that gave space to creativity and innovation which in effect created newer talents. The young, raw talents of Ekushey TV till this date rule the sphere of private television. Whether it is ATN News or NTV or Baishakhi TV or the newly created Ekattor TV, the head honchos fondly remember their "chairman sir" and how it all started by him banking on them by heavily investing on their training.

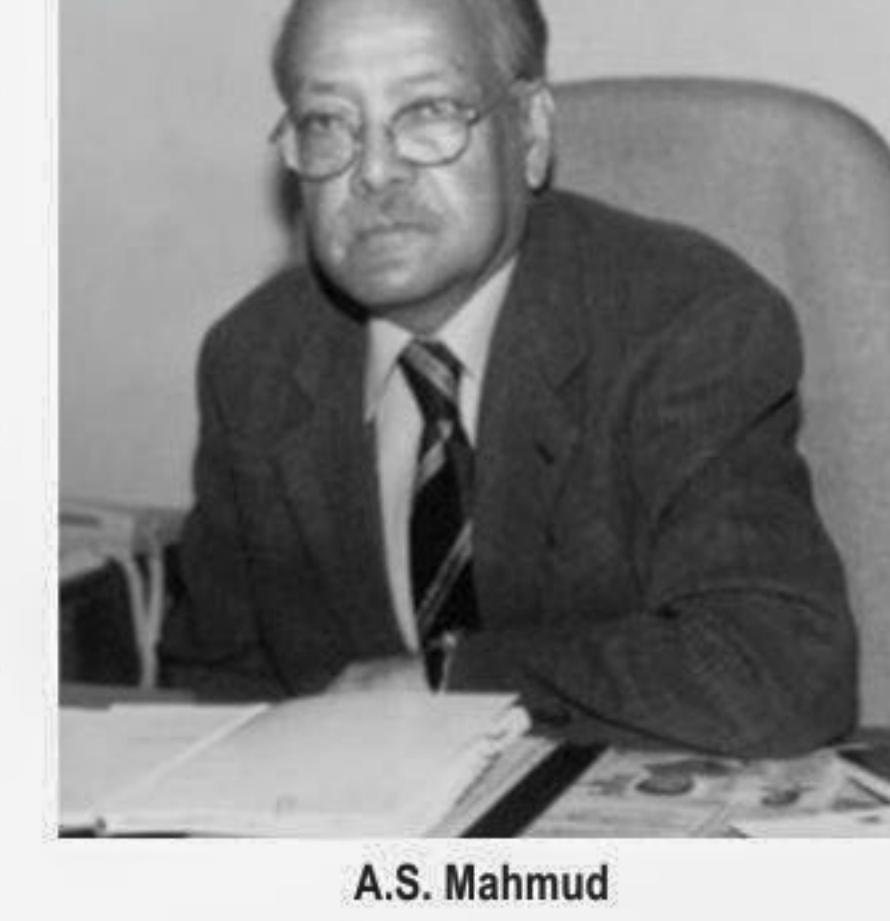
He was about creating opportunity for someone who would otherwise not get one. He was about realising people's unmet potential.

Not many people knew he was also part of the governing body of another organisation which imbued that same spirit of realising the potential of the people. He was a wellwisher and

active supporter of Brac from the early days. As Sir Fazle fondly recalls, he played an important role in crucial junctures of the growth of Brac and would have been proud to see it grow to be largest NGO in the world.

So what guided him? The man who saw the future was firmly guided by the values of the past, and that is what made it so special. His guide was undoubtedly the spirit of 1971. Lot of us talk about it but how many live by it? Spirit of 71 to him was about equity and justice. Ekushey TV was truly imbued with the spirit of 1971. Every single programme of ETV was guided by that vision of amplifying the voices of the unheard. It turned out to be a vision of Bangladesh which was firmly guided by the secular, pragmatic values of our birth and powered by the energy of youth.

Sadly, he was way ahead of his time. Perhaps in a different country his life would have been celebrated more. He lived by the values and died by the values. He never cared much for recognition. His recognition came from the villagers crowded in a tea stall to watch the Ekushey news, from the young artists whom he patronised, from the extended friends and family entertained by



A.S. Mahmud

him who used to fondly called him "Ati Shukhi Mahmud."

But some of us, his relatives, the mere mortals, wish that the state would officially recognise him for his game-changing contribution to this country -- the fruits of which we are getting still. They say a country does not get heroes if they are not recognised. I hope we recognise this real hero in this country where role models are few and far between.

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US' dangerous stance

undermine the peace, security, and economic growth in this region."

On the other hand, she announced that China's Diaoyu Islands are under the administration of Japan and the US-Japan Security Treaty obliges the US to defend Japan in the event of island-related hostilities.

The US has complicated the territorial dispute between China and Japan. Although it claims to be ostensibly neutral, its partiality to its ally emboldened Japan to "nationalise" three of the Diaoyu Islands last September, breaking the two countries previous consensus to shelve the dispute.

Japan stole the islands from China and held them until the end of World

War II, when the US took control.

Based on the backroom Okinawa Reversion Treaty, the US returned them to Japan in 1972 amid protests from China.

This was counter to the principles of the Cairo Declaration of 1943 and the Potsdam Proclamation of 1945, which obliged Japan to return all the territories it stole from China.

By putting the Diaoyu Islands under the US' treaty obligations, the US Secretary of State has highlighted that the US will go against any unilateral action that will infringe upon the administration rights of Japan.

Clinton's words made clear to all that the US will allow its security treaty with Japan to go beyond the

bilateral scope and undermine the sovereignty of China.

The way the US is bracing and bolstering Japan is dangerous given Japan's plans and the way Japan is letting the tension flare up. Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said last week that Japan may fire tracer bullets as warning shots at Chinese planes that patrol the Diaoyu Islands.

Clinton's remarks have only added fuel to the fire.

The region welcomes the US if it acts as a peacemaker, not if it acts as a provocateur.