

## Poor state of human rights highlighted

*Continuing denial cannot be helpful*

THE Human Rights Forum comprising 19 leading human rights organisations in the country unveiled some disturbing trends over a three year period from 2009-2012 on April 17. From what has been presented it appears that some 462 individuals were killed in one form of encounter or another with law enforcement agencies. A further 156 people were listed “missing” and presumed dead. The data include names of several high profile individuals including BNP Organising Secretary Ilias Ali who went missing more than a year ago and labour union leader Alim -- neither of whom has been heard of since their disappearance.

Sadly, such killings or forced disappearances do little to uplift the image of Bangladesh as a law abiding country. The denial mode which the government appears to be entrenched in is despairing, to say the least. This becomes more evident than ever when Foreign Minister Dipu Moni claims flat out that there have been no cases of “extra-judicial” killings in the country, especially when there is ample evidence to the contrary. Denial hardly serves to further the cause of establishing good governance. Rather it encourages departure from the rule of law and provides a blank cheque to certain law enforcing agencies to act as judge, jury and executioner.

Is it not high time for the government to wake up and face certain ground realities? That the incidents of human rights violation are evidently being perpetrated by members of state organs, and are being done in complete impunity is a sad commentary on the state of affairs. We cannot fathom precisely how a democratically-elected government, especially one which had pledged in its election manifesto to do away with extra-judicial killings now condones it. The ramifications of such practice are not lost on anyone domestically or internationally -- a fact the authorities would be wise to acknowledge.

## Professor Yunus has done us proud again!

*He is our true ambassador of goodwill to the outside world*

ALMOST to a man or woman, Bangladeshis should feel honoured by Professor Md. Yunus' receiving the US highest civilian award, the Congressional Gold Medal. This tops up his having received the US Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009, another of the highest civilian awards of the United States.

That he is in the company of Norman Borlaug, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Elie Wiesel, Aung San Suu Kyi and Mother Teresa -- personalities who received two US gold medals as well as the Nobel peace prize -- exalts us as a country. The image of Bangladesh has been enhanced by his magnificent deeds of popularising micro-credit as a socio-economic tool for progress worldwide. Also, his concept of social business is breaking new grounds with each passing day as the world gets beholden to his practical set of ideas. He has remarkably bridged the conventional gap between the precept and the practice.

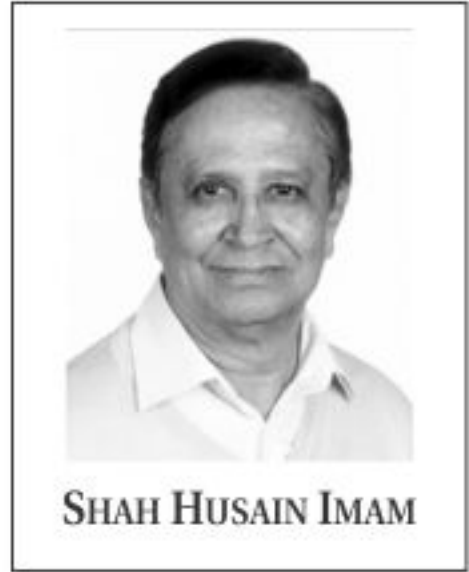
The spirit of the award ceremony comes with a resounding resonance through the citation of the House Speaker John Boehner. Said he, "Professor Yunus set out to do what may be the biggest thing of all, and that is liberating people to seek a better life. And not just any people, but men and women who had only known misery, who had been told they were no good."

Regrettably, however, there has been a marked dissonance between how the world looks at him and appreciates his works and the way he has been treated domestically -- thanks to the leadership. People are uppermost in his mind and like in the case of Nobel prize he has dedicated the present awards to the people of Bangladesh. This is a manifestation of a robust sense of belonging on the part of a world achiever to his motherland.

He merits unreserved respect and consideration of all quarters in the country. More than that perhaps, his

# 14

## PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

ASK any politician on either side of the aisle, he or she will feign complete ignorance of his or her party having an anchor point -- I mean overseas. But in private, they will confide in you that such indeed is the case.

Considering the stubborn-as-a-bull-obduracy on the part of both parties -- and the AL in particular spurning all advice and suggestions for clearing the deck for the next general election -- one wonders whether they rest on the oars of connections to some powerful countries or not.

Such a deduction can be drawn from the highly surreal goings-on in national politics. Never before has the country faced such a multidimensional challenge as it does at present. If the parties didn't root for certain countries in terms of support and a virtual carte blanche to go about their partisan agenda, they would be out of oxygen and gasping for breath by now. That they are not running out of steam to do as they please is a reflection of tacit indulgence given by the powers that are.

Awami League is viewed as a party drawing strength from India, USA, UK and other countries in the European Union. The BNP is seen as an entity having closer ties with Pakistan, Middle East and Arab countries. China is in the middle crossing the river by feeling the stones under water, as the famous Chinese proverb

goes. Beijing knows that it has to deal with any incumbent government irrespective of party considerations. Not that the other capitals follow any different practice.

China's economy-driven retuning with India and Myanmar is an example of Beijing's inclusive policies towards neighbours so as to ensure tranquility in the region as a precondition to rapid development.

The hard truth is that the behaviour of our political party leaders surprises onlookers in a fast-moving, interdependent, communicative and interacting world, and even perhaps amuses them. The flippancy and shortsightedness of their actions tend to quiz the observant as to whether

**With unsheathed swords, the AL and the BNP are fighting each other. It's not, however, their blood that is spilled, but the others' which is. They are asking for 'sacrifice' from the people when they have already exhausted their capacity for it!**

they understand where their best interests lie.

Here, in passing, you stumble into a quote by Alfred Austin, a critic and political writer in England of the early twentieth century: "No two women are alike, in fact no one woman is alike."

With unsheathed swords, the AL and the BNP are fighting each other. It's not, however, their blood that is spilled, but the others' which is. They are asking for 'sacrifice' from the people when they have already exhausted their capacity for it!

Continuing entreaties from concerned circles that they bend over backwards to scale down their intransigent positions on the

caretaker may have drawn a blank so far but these shouldn't anymore. Noticeably, two sets of suggestions, one from TIB and another from CPD, have also been proffered to stem the cascading crisis.

There's no point rehashing the proposals that have been widely covered in the media and disseminated, except to share the urgency and anxiety with which these were aired by the think-tanks. In a nutshell, the formulas rest on the assumption that members of parliament and not unelected persons will cut the deal under a speaker-presidential umbrella through consensus.

The other important elements are

that members of the poll-time government will be selected 30 days before expiry of the present government's tenure so that the president can hand over power to the interim government after dissolving the parliament. Thus, the crucial concerns over securing the participation of all major political parties in the general election to make it credible and acceptable appear to have been addressed by both TIB and CPD.

The prime minister is dismissive of the new TIB formulas as she has been of any previous suggestions by different quarters, but that without assigning any reason for her rejection. Being reactive rather than proactive she merely said that these would

“complicate” matters rather than facilitate a solution. Normally one would have expected her government to welcome the recommendations in principle and then to say that these will be given consideration. At least, the public would then have been assured of a semblance of rationality in the government's approach.

But this was not to be; for, in the PM's perception, 15th Amendment, whereby the interim caretaker provisions were struck out of the Constitution through a brute majority in parliament, is cast-iron; it's immutable like the law of nature. In human affairs, there is no last word, every crisis is amenable to resolution provided there is a sincere intent to seek it, particularly in politics.

If the PM rejected the proposals, some leaders of 18-party alliance went a step further; they said the BNP-led 14 party alliance has had the TIB spell out the formulae on their behalf. So what if they did?

Perhaps AL has taken the cue from former BNP minister Khondoker Mosharraf Hossain's suggestion that the TIB recipe can be a basis for talks.

Since the Jote leaders, in an apparent response to TIB proposals, have hinted at drawing the outlines of a roadmap to election on behalf of the Awami League, a positive signal, howsoever slender may have been put across to the other side.

If journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step so also the process of dialogue gets started from an icebreaking initiative.

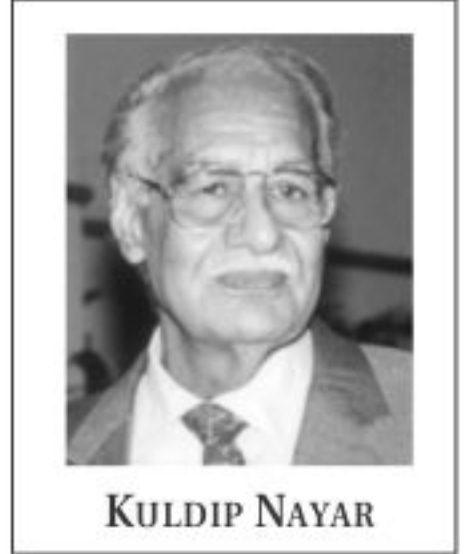
The prime question is: Who will bell the cat?

.....

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.  
E-mail: husain.imam@gmail.com

## BETWEEN THE LINES

# Salaam to slum dwellers



KULDEEP NAYAR

UNTIL recently, one refrain of a song in praise of slum dwellers was on most Indian lips. The refrain, *Jai Ho-Jai Ho*, had attracted so much attention that it fetched an Oscar Award. What the song conveyed was how those who were on the margin were doing their best to come up, without challenging the society. There was no demolition of houses or buildings which had come up illegally. The worst came only a few days ago.

True, natural calamities are hard to avert. But what happened at Mumbra, in the Thane district of Maharashtra, could well have been avoided but for the administrative inadequacies. It was more of a man-made crisis. Greedy real estate owners, contractors, politicians and bureaucrats, who maintain their regular liaisons, will have to share the blame for the tragedy which took toll of 74 people and injured 61 others.

When an eight-storey tower for slum dwellers comes up in a record three-four months, it is understandable how the building may have been raised. It is not easy obtaining approvals from civic authorities or getting a plan passed, let alone going ahead with the construction of a multi-storey building. It takes several rounds of trips to the municipal offices, spread over months, and that too only after greasing the palms of officials can one think of obtaining approvals from various officials.

This brings us to the basic problem that most metros in the country face today: acute shortage of housing. Obviously, the cake is small and the number of people wanting a slice has been on the increase. Had the size of the cake grown larger there would have been something for everybody to

take home. But those in Mumbai know that the tragedy was due to the acute need for housing in Thane and its suburbs and the flourishing land-grab business patronised by the powerful politico-builder-police-civic official nexus. The nexus makes it easier for the builders to “manage” things the way they want.

Apparently, in the Mumbra case the builders had made all arrangements, including providing electricity and water to the residents, without any legal paperwork so that the flats could be occupied by the unsuspecting owners. But such a thing became possible only when the builders had on their side the Thane Municipal Corporation (TMC) officials, who preferred to remain silent even after the locals had complained about an illegal building coming up in their vicinity.

**The remarkable thing about the efforts of living at the grassroots is the salutation to these people who have no resources. *Jai Ho* has become a salutation to a large extent. If the worst could be avoided, the slum dwellers would come out of the bondage of poverty as the days go by.**

This goes on to establish how the realtors and municipal officials in the state or, for that matter in any other part of the country where space comes at a premium, connive with each other. In the Mumbra case, the TMC officials just ignored the complaints that the tower had come up on tribal or forest land. One thing that has come out clear is that the building has come up on reclaimed land under which ran a *nullah*, which carried drainage water, after the TMC officials and a local corporator, who have now been arrested along with a senior police official, had helped. The two builders, who were slapped with culpable homicide charges, too, have been taken into custody.

Understandably, Chief Minister

Prithviraj Chavan has ordered an inquiry into the collapse. But what is tragic is that the chief minister became wiser after the event to admit in the state assembly that the building was completely illegal and may have come up on tribal or forest land. He further informed the house that Thane had 57 “very dangerous” and 1,159 “dangerous” buildings that were illegal and in which nearly 88,000 people lived. But if one were to take the entire figure of illegal structures in Thane district alone, as submitted by the state government to the Bombay High Court three years ago, it had touched the five-lakh mark. It must have multiplied into several more lakhs in and around Mumbai by now.

No doubt, the Indian real estate market is vibrant in nature. Since majority of people prefer to invest in real estate sector, more for long-term

investment than for accommodation, those in real estate business are out to make quick bucks. The only solution to this escalating problem is a stringent law that will make builders wary of certain standards. In fact, the Union Housing Ministry has proposed a specific clause to be included in the revised Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Bill it is likely to introduce.

If the proposed bill gets the cabinet and parliament nod, the builders will have to utilise 70% of the money collected for a particular project to spend it in that project. The bill seeks to establish a regulatory body for the real estate sector to ensure transparency in property or real estate transactions, besides other benefits

which are aimed at protecting the consumers. But, as would one expect, there is a widespread opposition from the builder lobby.

What happened in Mumbra is not unique. There have been several such cases of official apathy in the past. One such instance that comes to my mind is another seven-storey structure that that came down like a pack of cards in the Lalita Park area of the national capital a few years ago. In this unauthorised East Delhi colony, the building had come up using substandard material. Thirty-four people had died and more than 60 people were injured in that accident. An inquiry was ordered by then Chief Minister Shiela Dikshit, but nobody knows what happened after that.

However, I do hope the probe ordered by Prithviraj Chavan does not meet the same fate. In most cases only a cursory inquiry is made and notices serviced on illegal constructors or, at worst, penalties levied. The builders go scot-free after paying up penalties. The builder lobby is so strong and powerful that politicians cannot survive without its patronage as they look up it to fund them during elections. Corruption and greed is such a deep-rooted disease in our body politics that it can't be pumped out of our system overnight. It needs the strongest political will. But which party has the courage to bell the cat?

Still the remarkable thing about the efforts of living at the grassroots is the salutation to these people who have no resources. *Jai Ho* has become a salutation to a large extent. If the worst could be avoided, the slum dwellers would come out of the bondage of poverty as the days go by.

.....

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 19

531

Battle of Callinicum: A Byzantine army under Belisarius is defeated by the Persian at Ar-Raqqah (northern Syria).

1839

The Treaty of London establishes Belgium as a kingdom.

1960

Students in South Korea hold a nationwide pro-democracy protest against president Syngman Rhee, eventually forcing him to resign.

1971

Vietnam War: Vietnam Veterans Against the War begin a five-day demonstration in Washington, D.C..

1999

The German Bundestag returns to Berlin, the first German parliamentary body to meet there since the Reichstag was dissolved in 1945.

2011

Fidel Castro resigns from the Communist Party of Cuba's central committee after 45 years of holding the title.