

## Strikingly humanitarian response to Savar disaster

*People and professionals extend help*

WE are having difficulty coming to terms with yet another disastrous accident. The scale of the 9-storey building called Rana Plaza collapsing in Savar has left us dumbfounded. As if that was not enough, cracks were detected in a nearby commercial building owned by the same person.

With the body count reaching into the hundreds and thousands feared trapped under the rubble, the outpouring of public sympathy has been something highly commendable. With everyone lending a hand in the rescue operation, directing traffic, and taking the injured to hospitals, this speaks volumes of a nation in shock. The collective effort, that is spontaneous in nature, to do all that is humanly possible to rescue as many victims and as fast as possible.

Immediately following the accident, the fire brigade, army units, police, Rab and civil administration came forward to help in the gigantic rescue operation. Yet, one can only marvel at the hundreds of volunteers thronging the site who put their lives on the line to enter the rubble to aid the undermanned rescue workers. Looking beyond the crash site, one finds doctors and interns working round the clock at all the nearby hospitals to treat the wounded. Some pharmaceutical companies have voluntarily come to the aid of medical services with much needed emergency supplies. Blood camps have been set up on site and all over the city, where people have thronged in their thousands to donate plasma.

Ordinary citizens, business establishments, students have all been galvanised into action. The sense of responsibility brought on by the disaster got translated into good reflexes on the part of the people. Yet when the dust has settled and the rubble cleared, one can only hope that authorities will wake up from their reverie and get their act together in addressing loopholes in the system that allow for disasters like this to happen on a regular basis.

## When protectors become victims

*Attacks on the police must stop*

YET again, police have come under attack in hartal violence perpetrated by political agitators. According to news reports, since the handing down of the death penalty verdict to Delwar Hossain Sayedee at the end of February, eight police personnel have been killed and over 300 injured in clashes between law enforcers and opposition activists. Three police officers are currently undergoing treatment -- one of them in critical condition -- following violence on the Jessore-Magura highway on the first day of the last 36-hour shutdown. The scene of a police officer's head being bludgeoned in a previous incident was covered widely by the media and is still fresh in our minds.

The police represent a face of the government, of the nation's law and order, and such unabated attacks on them bring into question not only the demonstrators' respect for the law but also the state of national security. What is the government doing to protect its own law enforcing agencies who are responsible for the protection of the people? How can such crimes be committed against law enforcers themselves and when they are, what message does it convey regarding the security of the common people of the country?

We believe it is high time the government took up the issue with special emphasis. Attacks against law enforcers must stop. They must be provided with adequate training and resources to protect themselves against such violence. Perpetrators of crimes against law enforcers must be dealt with promptly and firmly in order to deter them from such acts in future. We must also draw the attention of the political leaders to the increasingly common, unacceptable policy of assaulting officers of the law.

The police for their part should mount human intelligence to gather information about any impending attack and prevent it, failing which they must apply techniques to control the mobs according to best

### CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD  
BADRUL AHSAN

arrogance. After an eight-storied building came crashing down in Savar last Wednesday, those three reasons were equally responsible. The tragedy has left over 150 people dead and roughly 1,600 people trapped inside its concrete wreckage. One may argue that it's yet another example of a manmade disaster, but I don't think so. The man who owned that building is a disaster himself, followed by the owners of the five garments factories and shops which were housed inside that rickety structure.

What collapsed in Savar was actually a monument of greed. Greed was piled up on the frail walls of that building as its owner stacked it with commercial floor spaces and his tenants squeezed maximum number of workers in those spaces to maximise their profits.

We now know all of these people were aware of the imminent risk, yet they decided to keep that building open for business. Garments workers complained that their factory owners forced them to enter the building on the morning of that fateful day even after cracks appeared on some of the pillars.

In the end what brought down that building was the burden of greed. Every worker who got crushed must have felt that burden before it squeezed out his or her last breath. The wounded ones have lived to tell the tale, but rest assured their agonies will soon be drowned by the cacophony

ACCIDENTS can happen in many ways, and they happen due to one or more of three reasons: human folly, willful neglect and atrocious

nies of politicians and BGMEA leaders. Rest assured the breadcrumbs of compensation will fall again off the BGMEA table for the victims and their families. Rest assured the government will appoint an investigation committee. It will be soon forgotten until the next tragedy hits, claiming more lives and maiming even more people.

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Only a few days ago we confronted the grim fact that the garments industry has been losing two billion taka every day during the *hartals*. As a nation, we are now so injured in our love of money that anything that causes monetary loss get us more worried than any loss that is caused by money. The proof of that insensitivity is in the cruelty. Roughly six months ago 112 workers were roasted to death inside a garment factory, and

its owner was never so much as asked to appear in a court or given so much as a rap on the knuckles.

That leads us to a higher calling. Where do we draw the line between murder and business? People put poison in our food. There are those who use inferior or insufficient materials in our buildings. Others reck-

And, it divides people into two categories. Some people are ready to die in order to live and others are ready to kill because they want to live.

The dead and injured bodies of victims, which are being dragged out of the rubbles of that building, are speaking eloquently of their wretched fate. But what does it tell about the other group of people, the victimisers, who thought it was more important to run their businesses than save human lives? They will tell you they had deadlines. They will tell you business was suffering from endless *hartals*. But they can never justify the needless loss of so many lives.

Who should answer that question, if not the state? The home minister has confirmed the building code was not followed in the course of construction. Why didn't he ask for the arrest of the building, factory and shop owners who pushed their tenants and workers into the harm's way? Next should be government employees who authorised the building in every step of the way.

Over the years, scores of workers have died in building collapse, stampede and fire in the factories. Over the years it has also surfaced that factory owners are always negligent, the government bodies are conniving and justice is elusive. Businesses can get away with murder.

Millions of mice and rats are killed in the laboratories around the world. Is that how we look at the frequent loss of human lives in Bangladesh? Yesterday we observed a national day of mourning, but I mourned the mourning instead. Deaths are mourned, murders are avenged. Mourning isn't right until all the owners are in prison. The building crushed but they killed those people.

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## We have sown and must now reap

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THESE are truly amazing scenes: hundreds of thousands of men, young and old, mostly in long white kurta and cap, descending on the commercial hub of the capital, swarming in the huge space of Shapla Chattar and the avenues beyond. These are members of Hefajat-e-Islam, or defenders of Islam, and fellow travellers. They swept out of the thousands of *Qawmi madrasas* in the country and gathered in Dhaka.

It is not just that their number has swelled, so have their demands over the last few weeks. The initial plan of a march on Dhaka was to protest alleged insults to the Prophet of Islam by some participant bloggers of the *Gonojagoron Mancha* at the *Projonmo Chattar* in Shahbagh, who had been gathering in huge numbers since early February to call for death penalty to people guilty of war crimes committed during the War of Liberation. The Hefajat termed them *naastic* (atheists), and wanted them punished for their alleged crime. The organisers of the *Mancha*, while resolutely denying that they were against religion or that they were a bunch of atheists, offered to discuss the matter with Hefajat, who declined to talk to them.

By the time the rally at Shapla Chattar began, that single demand escalated to as many as thirteen, including reinstatement of "absolute trust in Allah" as a guiding principle of the constitution, enactment of law providing for death penalty for blasphemy, classifying Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslim, and scrapping of "anti-Islam" women policy and education policy. Among other things, the Hefajat would also get rid of all sculptures that depict the human figure in public places, and stop "free mixing" of men and women.

It does not require a leap of faith to recognise that the Hefajat is calling for nothing less than an Islamic state, of which the model is Saudi Arab or the Taleban variety of orthodoxy. Public floggings and executions, eradication of women's education, and destruction of ancient sculptures flash across the mind.

One wonders how the Hefajat's stance hardened, at the time it did.

After all, if the bloggers were defaming Islam's Prophet at all, they must have been doing it for quite sometime. Was the organisation waiting for a signal of political legitimacy? If they were, they found it from two sources. First, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, former president of the country and leader of a political party, denounced the young men and women at Shahbagh as anti-Islamic. The second signal came from Begum Khaleda Zia, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party chief, who denounced the *Gonojagoron Mancha* as *noshito* (spoiled), misguided, youth. Such explicit denunciations from two national political leaders, particularly the latter, must have been siren songs for the Hefajat, who claim to be innocent of politics.

It would be naïve to leave the matter there. There were immediate instigations like the denunciations of the Shahbagh youth. There were also the war crimes trials that the Jamaat-e-Islami and its cohort, the Chhatra Shibir, have portrayed as attack against

not new, much of this expansion has taken place in recent years. The education a *Qawmi madrasa* impart is overwhelmingly fundamentalist Islam, with little regard to the world of knowledge outside its precincts. Faith in literal religion is its only creed; critical thinking is alien to it.

The Hefajat also professes to be a peaceful organisation. There are serious allegations of its past links with militant organisations; the events during and following the Hefajat rally of April 6 give lie to its peace-loving image. Its claim to be apolitical has also turned out to be unfounded.

The Jamaat, the Hefajat and their cohorts are not, however, the only hands that sowed the seeds of literal, obscurantist, religion and hatred of everything else. There are others that helped. Among elements of the society that have been quietly working to undo the secular-pluralist ideals behind the creation of Bangladesh is the mosque-based organisation called Tabligi Jamaat. The organisation has

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some innocent Islamic scholars rather than war criminals. Both gave life to the Hefajat. But the origins of the ideas that gelled into its thirteen-point demand reach far into the past.

Many a hand sowed the seeds that produced the present crop of Islamic fundamentalism. Since its rehabilitation in 1975, the Jamaat had plenty of time to nurture its plan to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh. It has been cultivating political Islam ever since. Its electoral success was limited but what it lacked in political influence, it made up with muscle power, mainly through the Islami Chhatra Shibir, and money that secular organisations can only envy. Also is its spawning of terrorist groups that sought to create an Islamic state right away.

Less conspicuous, till recently, have been the *Qawmi madrasas* that are now the force behind the Hefajat-e-Islam. There are tens of thousands of *Qawmi madrasas* in the country, their enrolment running into hundreds of thousands. Although this system is

succeeded in convincing many Bengali women that wearing the sari is not Islamic, and has banished critical thinking from human discourse.

Many imams of our mosques use ingredients in their sermons that are very often insults to the intellect. They have been among the primary purveyors of obscurantism in the country, and many of them subscribe to the Hefajat creed. It is only on rare occasions that we see quotes from the Quran that would decry activities of these defenders of the faith, such as: "I (Allah) have sent down the Quran and it is for me to preserve it," a quote recently used by an Islamic leader to criticise the Hefajat. He also asked pointedly where the Hefajat was when Pakistani soldiers murdered and raped in 1971.

Sadly, to the list of people who has helped introduce religion in public life must be added our political leaders. Many of them, doing secular politics, hardly miss an opportunity to show off their religious piety. There

are many manifestations of this phenomenon. Among them visit to *mazars* of saints before embarking on election campaigns must be considered the most important, as well as the most bizarre in its logic. Elections are a matter of politics and support of the public. The leaders merely wear their religion on their sleeves. But the idea of religion having a place in politics gets one more boost. If the leaders usher religion into politics, why should not the electorate, so close to the *madrasa* and the Tabligis, give it a further push?

Perhaps even more importantly, the two largest political parties of the country vie against each other in their claim to be religion-friendly. At the very least, they would fight tooth and nail against allegations of being not Islamic enough. They pander to religious sentiments and accuse each other for doing so.

With so much stacked in society against the ideas of secular pluralism, is there any hope that literal religion can still be kept away from politics, and left to its own place of honour and dignity? Although the seeds sown over so many years cannot be unsown, I believe the crop reaped can still be transformed. The youths of *Gonojagoron Mancha* give us hope. They need total support. And the rest of us must also say what they leave unsaid. In any civilised society, the atheists too have the right to their belief. Everyone has the right to excoriate them, if they like, but only by words. No one needs to like them. No one has the right to call for their death either.

The government's handling of the "atheist" bloggers is unconscionable. Bloggers have been arrested and paraded before the press the way criminals in possession of contrabands are. These youths are not criminals and their "crime" has not been proved. On the other hand, the recent stance of the government on the thirteen demands of the Hefajat, if press reports are true, gives us some hope. It should resolutely resist the demands of the so-called defenders of the faith.

Finally, the women of the country, who have everything to lose at the hands of obscurantists, remain one of our best hopes.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 26

1564

Playwright William Shakespeare was baptized in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England (date of actual birth is unknown).

1963

In Libya, amendments to the constitution transform Libya (United Kingdom of Libya) into one national unity (Kingdom of Libya) and allows for female participation in elections.

1986

A nuclear reactor accident occurs at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Soviet Union (now Ukraine), creating the world's worst nuclear disaster.

1989

People's Daily publishes the People's Daily editorial of April 26 which inflames the nascent Tiananmen Square protests

2005

Under international pressure, Syria withdraws the last of its 14,000 troop military garrison in Lebanon, ending its 29-year military domination of that country (Syrian occupation of Lebanon).