

BITTER TRUTH

Greed compounded by criminal negligence



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

IT was not an earthquake that caused the collapse of the 9-storied Rana Plaza, which housed four garments factories, where more than three thousand workers were working at the time of the collapse on April 24. It was a man-made disaster. What happened in Rana Plaza was an act of mass murder. Factory owners led by Sohel Rana, the owner of the building, forced the workers to work in the building despite the warning about the cracks in the walls.

As reports reveal, the building was raised on a filled-up canal. The design (!), which was for a four-storey building, was approved by the Savar Pourashova, an organisation least competent to approve any design. It was later raised to 9-storey without further approval. As per Greater Dhaka Building Code 2008, there is no scope for Savar Pourashova to approve such a design. So construction and use of this multi-storied building were totally illegal. The explanation given by Rajuk that it cannot do its job for lack of manpower is unacceptable, because the area falls within the jurisdiction of Rajuk.

Reports revealed that in Rana Plaza, the 4th to 8th floors were built between 2008 and 2012 with column size gradually getting thinner, which created an unbalanced load factor. Experts believe that it was mainly weak foundation, faulty design and use of poor quality construction materials that triggered this collapse.

The death toll till May 2 morning was 411 with more than 2,400 rescued alive but with grievous injuries, while hundreds are missing. People have become so inured to disasters and deaths that they only wake up after a disaster has hit. Ad-hoc measures like forming committees are then taken to appease public rage, and then life goes on as usual.

Neither are the reports of these committees made public nor are the recommendations implemented. BGMEA can't just pass the buck. If they say that media coverage harms the image of the country and business potential, then they will have to have their own surveillance and monitoring cell to look into the appalling situation that has cast a shadow of death over the booming garment industry. Reports published in the media quoting Fire Service and Civil Defence Directorate show that out of 797 garments factories in greater Dhaka, 243 installations are under threat of collapse.

The Rana Plaza incident touched a chord in the citizens because the garment industry employs the largest labour force in the country and earns huge foreign exchange, and is a part of our national pride and existence.

It is most shocking that an industry that employs about 30 lakh workers, and now ranks as the biggest foreign exchange earner, has given so little attention towards ensuring safety and security of its workers. No sensible citizen can condone the idea of allowing such a vital industry to operate with so little accountability.

Flouting of safety norms and building code, failure to install fire safety gadgets, absence of water reservoir in and around the factory premises, and non-accessibility of fire fighting equipment have turned the country's garments factories into veritable death traps.

In 2005, the Spectrum garments factory at Savar collapsed killing 38 people. Building collapse in other areas of Dhaka is tell-tale evidence of the havoc that can be wreaked if we fail to look at the flaws and lapses. With our bitter experience of building collapses in the city and suburbs, due mainly to structural defects and design flaws, it has become imperative on the part of Rajuk to make sustained efforts through media publicity to create awareness about the safety norms to be followed in building construction.

It is most shocking that an industry that employs about 30 lakh workers, and now ranks as the biggest foreign exchange earner, has given so little attention towards ensuring safety and security of its workers. No sensible citizen can condone the idea of allowing such a vital industry to operate with so little accountability. The irony in the Rana Plaza collapse is that, because of powerful lobby, arrogance, connections, and greed, Sohel Rana flouted the rules and pushed these poor workers into the jaws of death.

So how can buildings be made resistant to collapse? Two essential factors are good design and good construction. The idea is to build structures in a way that can absorb maximum force and still remain stable. A leading structural engineer in the country says: "If the beams and columns of the building are properly joined, 50% of the collapse-

used.

The workers died because of the insensitivity, callousness, unbridled greed and criminal neglect of the owner of the building, the owners of the factories, and the concerned agencies in the government. The most pertinent question is whether the callous and greedy building and factory owners will escape through the exit routes of law that could always be used in favour of the high and mighty.

The High Court order banning sale or transfer, and confiscation, of the properties owned by Sohel Rana and the owners of the factories, and freezing of their bank accounts is most assuring and welcome. The HC also ordered and authorised BGMEA to withdraw money from their bank accounts for payment of salary and other benefits to the garments workers, and forming of a committee headed by the GOC, Nine Infantry Division to find ways to rehabilitate the families of the dead and disabled garments workers out of the sale proceeds of the property owned by Sohel Rana and 4 garment factory owners.

The job done by the valiant rescue workers and Enam Medical College Hospital and its staff will remain etched in public memory. The tragedy with tragedies is that they have a short shelf life as far as public memory is concerned. A majority of us are so caught up in today's rat race that our memory cannot absorb more information than it can handle, especially if it is disturbing.

Some events have the ability to transcend such mental firewalls. The Rana Plaza incident was one such. Days on, it still haunts us, because it was such a catastrophe, an act of mass murder, the likes of which had not been witnessed in the last 20 years. It is high time we ponder about allowing these death traps to pass off as factories where innocent people go to earn a living.

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Nomination of candidates for Parliamentary elections: Bangladesh and Malaysia

SHARIF AZIZ

THE Malaysian Parliament has been dissolved. The election is scheduled for May 5. Anticipating fierce competition from the opposition Mr. Najib Razak, the outgoing prime minister, has lined up his team of candidates known as Najib's T-Team. It will be a Dream Team, the Best of the Best. The line-up reflects the inclusiveness of the coalition, guided by the 1Malaysia principle and built around trustworthiness and commitment to transformation. A significant number of professionals, lawyers, doctors and diplomatic administrative officers, and those from government bodies and agencies, as well as ulama, are included in the line-up. This line-up will show the desire for "Change."

Just to mention some highlights for selection of candidates: 33% old legislators will simply be not considered for nomination by the BN-UMNO ruling coalition: 33% of Parliamentary and 49% of state seats will see new faces. All those above 60 years of age will be just out. All nominations will have to come from the constituency/grass root. Criteria set for candidacy are really worthy of high praise.

The line-up has a balance of new and old, experience and exuberance, wisdom and a burning passion to serve. These are men and women who had not only acquitted themselves well in the past five years but also delivered consistently and shown that they have the people's interests at heart. The candidates were chosen because they are individuals who can become excellent advocates and serve impeccably as problem solvers for the people while improving constituents' wellbeing. This is in tandem with the party's "People First" concept. The spirit of "Party above Self" is also highly evident. There were a number of new faces whom the leadership wanted to field as candidates but they declined saying it was not their time. Aside from saying they were not ready for the heavy responsibility, they felt that they might not have what it takes be 'enslaved' to voters.

The candidates will be the driver and overriding factor in Najib's consideration of the needs of the people, their aspirations and their ability to carry out the "AKUNJANI" (Letter of Guarantee) as outlined in the BN manifesto. The line-up will also reflect BN's efforts in grooming talent that possess the

ability and qualifications beyond oratory skills to cement their confidence in a future BN-led government. Malaysians will see how the meticulously drawn-up list not only features those who meet their aspirations and expectations but also reflects a strong, collective leadership that will raise confidence in the electorate beyond this poll and into successive elections.

Party leadership's decision on its candidates weighed on several critical factors, including age and track record and report card of candidates, before pinning down the final names. The BN leadership had also carried out surveys to ascertain the reception of the people towards candidates to be fielded in every constituency. The survey and "referendum" on the candidates were carried out by three independent bodies for the leadership to gauge the sentiments of the people

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towards the names of the potential as well as shortlisted candidates. The leadership also looked into the issue of liability, including how people in the area viewed him or her. It is crucial for issue of perception to be addressed thoroughly as BN candidates must be those that the people can accept wholeheartedly.

BN members also saw how the leadership took pains to address the disappointment of some hopefuls by getting them all under one roof to drive home the message that the party was above all else. Those old and veterans who were not picked were told to keep their chin up and give their undivided loyalty to those bearing the BN flag in the election. BN was also determined to ensure that its candidates were not saddled with health issues as it wanted only leaders who could best serve their constituents.

The usual "heat" of election is there, but

the Malaysians are yearning for a fair and respectable election and the Election Commission is determined to ensure it. The net dividend: good governance; honesty of purpose; patriotism; country first; national consensus on major issues are some of the factors which have made Malaysia today a role model country in the world. The country plans to declare itself as a developed nation by 2018, two years before the dead line i.e. 2020. Malaysians will enjoy a per capita income of \$ 15,000 by 2020. The achievements of the country are spectacular and dazzling, and one can go online to glimpse some of it; Iskander Malaysia; Putrajaya -- the planned, growing and dynamic city -- Cyberjaya -- Multimedia Corridor -- and many other programmes and projects for advancing the country. The country's foreign currency reserve stands today at \$140 billion. The Employees Provident Fund is expected to reach \$ 225 billion (RM 700 billion) within next 5 years.

It may be out of context to discuss, but mention of Turkey, another rising star, should be made here. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who won for the third time in elections (last one in June 2011) the country once known as "sick man" of Europe is highly esteemed now. The country's per capita income has increased from \$ 3,500 to \$10,000. Dramatic improvements in the lives of ordinary Turks have taken place due to adherence to good electorate system and good governance in a country which is steadfast in advocating secular democracy.

In comparison, where does Bangladesh stand? Today, we have a per capita income of only \$ 900. Foreign exchange reserve stands at \$12 billion.

We have had lot of discussions regarding selection and nomination of candidates in our election. Spending trunk loads of money to buy nominations is not uncommon in our system. But unfortunately, our ensuing election is not even in sight. With each passing day we are pushed into more uncertainty. Hartal/work stoppage for days together is not seen even in India and Pakistan, where this culture still exists. Only God knows when our leaders will become mature.

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Readers write on target



GOOD news! Today I turn my column space over to a far more intelligent source of commentary -- you. And to anyone who thinks I am a lazy waste-of-space using material from readers to save myself work, I would respond: Yeah? So? Are you saying that we lazy waste-of-space types are automatically bad people? Huh, huh?

Anyway, I quoted one line recently which triggered a rush of comments and emails: thanks, Chris, Grandpa, Liftie, Ram and other readers. The line was this: "There are 10 types of people in the world: those who understand binary and those who don't."

First, thanks to readers who explained that in binary, a mathematical language, 01 is how you write "one" and 10 is how you write "two." An even smarter reader wrote a response in ternary, a mathematical language in which the number three is written "10". He wrote: "There are 10 kinds of people in the world: those understand ternary, those who don't, and those who think this is going be a binary joke."

Lucky for me, other readers, using the comment column and email, offered one-liners suitable for the social cluster to which I belong ("Stupid People").

Here are the first three to arrive.

1) "For my grandfather, there were two kinds of people in the world: Those who agreed with him, and those who hadn't yet agreed with him." (Anon).

2) "There are two types of people in this world, good and bad. The good sleep better, but the bad seem to enjoy the waking hours much more." (Woody Allen).

3) "There are two kinds of people in the world, those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't." (Robert Benchley).

A reader named Lift Lurker, also known as Otis, wondered if jokes like these were illegal now: "There are two types of people in the world. But we are not allowed to differentiate them due to anti-discrimination laws."

Mandy Chen, a reader from Hong Kong, came up with a good one: "There are two types of music lover in the world: those who think Justin Bieber is a terrible singer, and Justin Bieber."

Several readers sent in aphorisms on the following lines: "There are two steps for success. 1) Don't tell all you know."

Emily E. wrote this: "There are two kinds of people in this world. Those who love me and those who haven't met me yet."

The next two quotes I categorise as Baffling.

1) The first comes from the movie Rhinestone: "There are two kinds of people in this world, and you ain't one of 'em."

2) The next comes from rock star Captain Beefheart: "There are only forty people in the world and five of them are hamburgers."

This came from a computer geek: "There are two types of people in the world: those who have banged their heads against their keyboards in frustration and those who will."

But my favourite line so far came from a reader named Jaya in Sri Lanka: "There are two types of people in this world: Those who can extrapolate from incomplete data and...?"

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