

## Gaps in new labour law

Address the lacunae

THE International Labour Organisation is unhappy with the amended labour law enacted recently. The body however commended the government for taking steps to better compensate workers for work-related deaths and coverage of medical treatment for occupational diseases, gratuity and maternity benefits. The limited scope for trade unionism and collective bargaining remain principal bones of contention. The new law does not in fact comply with two provisions of ILO, i.e. Conventions 87 and 88; freedom of association and right to organise, and collective bargaining.

Indeed, many areas that had been previously agreed to in the Tripartite Consultative Meeting have not been included in the new law. The ministry of labour had previously agreed to allow workers to allow 20 per cent non-factory workers to be allowed to become members of the union. The law allows for 10 per cent in case of public sector and none for the private sector. With regards to the requirement of 30 per cent membership to form a union, it is felt that the rule may make it difficult for workers to organise unions in larger companies employing thousands of workers spread across many factories.

Given that the United States also holds similar reservations about the amended Act that has been passed and linked future amendments made to the reinstatement of GSP facilities, it is only in our best interest that the government work with ILO to sort out differences at the earliest and hammer out a law meeting international standards.

## Raise in freedom fighters' allowance

More needs to be done

THE government's decision to raise the decorated freedom fighters' monthly allowances is a step in the right direction. It has been long overdue.

What these great sons of this soil and their family members had been getting so far in the name of allowance was a pittance. And it was certainly not the right way to honour them.

The amounts proposed as allowances for the different categories of title holders from Bir Sresthas at Tk.12,000 down to Bir Protiks at Tk6,000 are way above the previous levels, but will need to be readjusted periodically.

However, the government's responsibility does not end with enhancing the allowances for the decorated freedom fighters only. In fact, the harder part of the task lies ahead, since a large number of genuine freedom fighters are still remaining outside the fold of the government's safety network. Many among them, who are still alive, and their family members, are living in extreme penury need to be sought out and brought under the umbrella. There are also the war heroes, who have died in the meanwhile leaving their families in the lurch and needing attention. The challenge before the government is to reach out to the genuine freedom fighters with financial support.

Usually with any government grant there is potential for corruption at the disbursement level. The administration would have to be on guard to seal off the possibilities of extortion.

## Reconditioned old launches!

S.A. MANSUR

YOUR front page photograph on the subject should not be the cause of any apprehension for prospective launch passengers! It is as good and as safe as any reconditioned car, of which there is a large number being driven on the roads of Dhaka! The major problem is overloading, which needs to be watched very carefully, including patrolling by police speed boats that should be deployed in full force for stopping launch overloading! More important is to ensure that the engines and other equipment are in good running condition!

This writer has had hands-on experience in overhauling (both hull and machinery), reconditioning and renovating launches. We also built new inland water transport vessels, way back in mid-1950s, at Narayanganj! However, in those days the number of river launches was much less; but the rush for this type of work before the Eid and Puja holidays was there; and I recollect that during those times our profit margins were at least twice as much as they were during normal times for similar work!

What is most important is that the river craft must have a valid permit for plying. This has to be real, issued by the proper authorities, and not forged. It would be more effective if these documents were press-sealed with adhesive coloured roundels often put on legal documents and educational degree certificates!

The government should also consider issuing sailing and fitness certificates like Lloyds and other classification societies. They are needed for merchant ships to legally ply the seas and oceans around the world! This will curtail launch accidents, as they will then be insured! Our local insurance companies may be allowed and approved to issue such fitness certificates; employing their own inspectors for ensuring a vessel's fitness! This can be set up and supervised by BIWTA; which can ensure safer and functional hull, main machinery and all auxiliary and safety equipment needed for safe plying on the rivers!

The writer is a retired engineer.

# When women are endangered species

## GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

out of home and stared at would on the Day of Judgment be roasting in the fires of hell.

Not a single individual present in that congregation said a word in protest, though there were many who were visibly irritated at all the nonsense coming from the preacher.

Until recently, a young preacher at a village mosque not far from Dhaka made it a regular bad habit to raise the subject of women at his Friday sermon. For no rhyme or reason, he cheerfully went into a detailed statement of what good Muslim women should do to keep themselves pure and untainted through not arousing the desires of the men around them. He made direct references to cleavages, bosoms, waists and free-flowing hair, telling his audience that it was all an invitation to the dungeon of the devil, a temptation to lead good men astray.

A day then came when a message, brusque and to the point, was conveyed to him that his preaching should focus on Allah and his Creation, not on women's anatomy. He has stayed away from spewing obscenity since then.

In the villages of this land, there are yet hundreds, if not thousands, of self-styled interpreters of Sharia law whose wisdom and sense of judgment consist in decreeing punishment for women even when the guilt in a commission of sin has been that of a man or a group of men. When it comes to a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, or call it adultery if you will, it has generally been the woman who has been flogged or stoned or ostracised in our villages. The man has got off lightly.

At burials of the dead, the cleric presiding over the funeral rites of the deceased has consistently preached that women cannot be present at the gravesite when the remains of the dead are being lowered into the earth. The rules and traditions of Islam do not say anywhere that a grieving wife or daughter or mother must not be witness to a parting sight of her beloved as he passes into the grave. And yet our clerics, for reasons they cannot explain, gravely declare that female mourners must stay a good many feet away from the grave at the moment of burial.

Now that the month of Ramadan is upon us, women presenters on television are required to pull the ends of their saris or their dupattas over their heads in order to maintain the sanctity of the holy month. No one explains how that enhances the religiosity of these women or the purity of the faith. And certainly no one suggests, in all this preoccupation with women, that men take to wearing

skullcaps in order to uphold the sanctity of Ramadan. It is always women who must preserve the faith, through fear of what will happen to them, here on earth and in the life thereafter, if they do not.

Some years ago, the *khatib* (now deceased) of Baitul Mukarram mosque publicly told the country that it was suffering through all its crises because women had come to rule men. God's curse, said he and his acolytes, fell on nations that acquiesced to rule by women. In other words, damnation would be the consequence of power wielded by the political women around us. A woman was prime minister at the time. Another woman was leader of the opposition. Neither said a word about the man's audacity.

Women remain a persecuted lot in this country. They do not pray alongside men in the mosques because of the erroneous belief, propagated by men little conversant with traditions of faith, that the law of religious belief does not encourage women in the mosque. Women do not enter the mosque, for they will be stopped at the door. And yet the truth does not go away that women did enter the mosque and did pray within its precincts, in the times of the Holy Prophet of Islam.

Remember Pakistan's Ziaul Haq. He had an absurdity called the *hudoood* ordinance imposed on Pakistan,

a questionable law that sought to turn women subjected to violence into guilty individuals. Women who were raped needed to have witnesses to the rape. Zia did not explain how the spectacle of a woman being raped could be elevated to the level of a festival, with other people watching the indecent act.

In their times, the Taliban decreed a ban on education for women in Afghanistan. Half a population was thus forced indoors into a world without light. The ayatollahs of Iran, once they came to power in 1979, swiftly went after women's attire. Suddenly, all signs of modernity pushed out of life, Iran's new rulers made women get into clothes that symbolised the advent of political and cultural regression.

Given such history, one is not surprised the ninety-three year-old leader of the Hefajat-e-Islam could not conceal his emotions when it came to talking about women. He saw no difference between the taste of tamarind and the sight of women. In such advanced years, it becomes the moral responsibility of the practitioners of faith to offer long prayers to the Almighty, to dwell on what lies in the grave and beyond. The Hefajat leader chose to focus on women. In the process, he forgot what religion was. And he reminded people, unwittingly or deliberately, of the seduction and sensuality that have, in the eyes of people like him, always defined woman.

It is such obscurantists who threaten us with things dark and deadly. It is because of these purveyors of medievalism that secularism must be made secure and liberalism must dig deeper roots. Bengali nationalism cannot, must not lose this battle.

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## | The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# The two-state imperative

ROGER COHEN

PEACE TALKS, it seems, are set to resume between Israelis and Palestinians after six visits to the region by Secretary of State John Kerry.

The heart sinks.

Israel and Palestine need a two-state peace. It would involve bitter compromises on both sides, but no more bitter than those accepted by Nelson Mandela in putting the future before the past, hope before grievance.

Without a two-state peace, Israel cannot remain a Jewish and democratic state because over time there will be more Arabs than Jews between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged this in stating that avoidance of a "bi-national state" was one of his objectives.

Without it, Palestinians will face enduring humiliation, the pride of statehood sacrificed to the false consolations of victimhood. They will live under Israeli dominion, marginalised economically and condemned to the steady erosion of dignity and territory that has been their lot since 1948. A new spasm of fruitless violence, perhaps even a third intifada, is possible.

So the talks are critical. Yet the heart sinks.

Netanyahu speaks now of avoiding the bi-national state. Yet his Likud Party has been (and remains) a forth-

*Peace talks offer a way out of this corrosive Israeli dilemma, back to the Zionist dream. They offer a way out of Palestinian delusion and denial to statehood. The heart sinks. Yet I cannot help hearing Mandela in his death throes: Prove me wrong, you cowards, decide at last if winning an argument is worth more than a child's life.*

Coupled with this view is the tenacious Palestinian attachment to the so-called right of return. Well, ask the Jews of Baghdad and Cairo, the Greeks of Asia Minor, the Turks of Greece and the ethnic Germans of Poland and Hungary about this "right." As the Israeli novelist Amos Oz once told me: "The right of return is a euphemism for the liquidation of Israel. If exercised there will be two Palestinian states and not one for Jews."

Joschka Fischer, the former German foreign minister born into a German family from Hungary, once noted that if the 15 million displaced ethnic Germans of Europe demanded the right of return there would be no peace in the continent.

Yes, the heart sinks because acceptance on both sides of the ever more invisible "other" is still so stunted and attachment to the idea of holding or recovering all the land still so tenacious. It is 66 years since the United Nations mandated the division of the land into two states.

Israel has fallen since 1967 into a terrible temptation. No democracy can be immune to running an undemocratic system of oppression in territory under its control. To have citizens on one side of an invisible line, and disenfranchised subjects without rights on the other, does not work. A democratic state needs borders. It cannot morph into repressive military rule for Palestinians in occupied areas while allowing state-subsidised settler Jews there to vote.

Gershon Gorenberg puts the post-1967 issue with great clarity in his fine book, *The Unmaking of Israel*: "If Israel really believed that the territorial division created by the 1949 armistice was null and void, it could have asserted its sovereignty in all of former Palestine -- and granted the vote and other democratic rights to all inhabitants."

It chose not to. The reason was evident: The size of the Palestinian population -- 1.1 million in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in 1967, 4.4 million today -- would have meant the end of the Jewish state. And so, "Israel behaved as if the territories were part of Israel for the purpose of settlement, and under military occupation for the purpose of ruling the Palestinians."

Peace talks offer a way out of this corrosive Israeli dilemma, back to the Zionist dream. They offer a way out of Palestinian delusion and denial to statehood.

The heart sinks. Yet I cannot help hearing Mandela in his death throes: Prove me wrong, you cowards, decide at last if winning an argument is worth more than a child's life.

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## LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR  
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### Parties lacking in purpose

What is happening in Bangladesh politics is very painful. The ruling party does not know what it is doing and the opposition is supporting the war criminals and getting votes. People are saying that ballot has become a box of wrath rather than a choice. My point is, AL has done many mistakes, but BNP is just cashing in on the lies spread by the fundamentalist groups to provoke the innocent religious people. I wonder which of them is good for the country.

Kabir Hossain Taposh  
Banani, Dhaka

### Time for AL to introspect

The ruling AL-supported mayoral candidates experienced ignominious defeats in all the CC elections held recently. It can not be said that the ruling party's debacle in this election was completely unexpected. In fact, the incumbent government's continuous misrule and political blunders overshadowed its achievements in the aforesaid elections.

The ruling party leadership's alleged involvement in the Padma bridge scam, maligning Nobel laureate Prof. Yunus and GB, unilateral scrapping of the CTC system and repression on the opposition seem to have left a negative impact on the public mind. Again, the alleged indulgence shown to anti-Islam bloggers and mishandling of the Hefajat issue might have seriously hurt the religious sentiments of the people.

However, the ruling party now needs a serious introspection and should immediately correct its ways before further damage is done to its image.

Md. Mohsin Ali  
Nutan Courtpara, Kushtia

### Beware of Hefajat

Hefajat-e-Islam Ameer Allama Shafi's sermon is unacceptable to us. This kind of mentality can only push us back to the dark ages. About 50% of our population is women and their contribution is just like their male counterparts. So the idea that women should remain illiterate and be confined to their houses is pure lunacy. BNP is maintaining some sort of relation with Hefajat for getting their support in the upcoming election. But Hefajat issue may backfire like the Bangla Bhai issue. I would like to request BNP not to use these forces to win the election.

Arif Ahmed  
On e-mail

### Comments on news report, "Relatives, staff occupy," published on July 22, 2013

Nds

It is too much to expect in this country that its lawmakers will abide by the law. I am simply disgusted with this democracy and would prefer to get rid of it.

### Nasirullah Mridha, USA

All illegal occupants should be dislodged from the NAM flats. House speaker could ask MPs why they indulged in this unscrupulous snaffle for their relatives who are not entitled to these flats.

### Abul Kashem

The entire scenery speaks of the utter irresponsibility and mismanagement of the government in all sectors, including the country and nation as a whole.

SM

Looks like MPs are like Mafias with constitutional right to loot and plunder.

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### "Telenor's rebuttal" (July 21, 2013)

#### deepjelejai

A very pathetic dissonance between our premier and Nobel laureate, orchestrated by PM herself.

### Waseem Khan

What is Sheikh Hasina's problem with Dr. Yunus? Leave him alone. He is the jewel of the country.

SM

PM's press secretary needs to be fired for sleeping on his job and for being totally unprofessional. As I suspected, Norwegian and US Embassies did take notice. PMO forgets that foreign governments do not care whether this was informal or formal. The bottom line is Mr Azad had 5 days before Yunus Center's rejoinder to disclaim the published news in the two major dailies of Bangladesh.

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### "US shows ways to get it back" (July 21, 2013)

#### Dev Saha

Tough medicine for the patient!

#### sirajul\_islam\_1

We should really be serious to do what is necessary and meet the action plan requirements. This is not only to get back the GSP benefits but to support long-lasting change in this industry that pays us a lot but also diminished us as a nation that naively saw the sending of our workers to unnecessary and avoidable deaths.