



Promoting Child Rights



2013 IN RETROSPECT

Political unrest played havoc with children

JAMIL MAHMUD

THE whole nation was shocked to see how a minor boy could be burned alive in front of his father in broad daylight. Fourteen-year-old Monir was burnt on November 4 last year when pro-hartals rowdies torched his father's parked covered van in Gazipur.

After three days of battle for life, he went beyond all pains and suffering in the lap of his father at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital. For most of his stay in hospital, the fifth grader was conscious and groaning with pain.

The skin all over his body erupted in blisters, and every breath he took was with racking pain as his respiratory tract was burned. He suffered 95 percent burns.

"He slept only for a few hours and woke up around 3:50am. As I was making some juice for him, he suddenly started twitching and jerking, his face contorted in pain. He tried to pull his tubes out, wanted to jump out of the bed and kept crying. I calmed him down, and he laid his head against my chest.

"Moments later, his body went limp. I knew he was gone," Ramjan Ali, the ill-fated father, described the last few minutes with his beloved son.

Almost similar fate as of Monir was suffered for Hasan, a 17-year-old bus helper, who was burned by the opposition men inside a parked bus in Iatrabari area on December 5.

It was not until firemen had doused the fire that they realized he was inside the bus. He was merely a boy, still

alive but blackened and hardly recognizable, lying on the black burnt mess of the backseat.

Hasan died that evening at DMCH after going through hours of excruciating pain.

Amid such political violence last year, especially in later part, children of Bangladesh were brought up in a very hazardous environment.

According to different hospital sources, as many as 30 children were either injured or succumbed to their injuries that they sustained during political agitations like hartals and blockades.

Several children lost their body parts when they mistakenly grabbed abandoned crude bombs from the street or dustbins. Children also fell victim to political clashes and chasing counter-chasing between miscreants and law enforcers.

Following the execution of war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah, a chasing between Shibir activists and policemen left minor Shanto Islam severely bullet-hit.

The 11-year-old boy was in the city to visit his father, who runs a tea-stall at Fakirpul. Shanto was running back to his aunt's house in Fakirpul to fetch lunch for his father.

A photo that shows Shanto lying unconscious on the street was published in the front pages of almost all the national dailies on the following day.

"My son lay in a pool of blood for around twenty minutes before he was rescued ... that too by another child. No one else dared to save my boy," his mother told The Daily Star.

Besides falling victim to political

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Victim of violence

violence, children were also used on political purposes in various occasions throughout last year. Alongside adults, children were seen picketing on the streets in hartals and blockades, hurling crude bombs and vandalising vehicles.

They had been forced to participate or paid in cash or kind by political activists to take part in party programmes that often turn violent.

Despite constant campaign of rights activists, rampant use of children in violent political activities had been going on unabated across the country. At least seven children were killed

Motijheel.

"I have come here with all the students of our madrasa. Our teachers have instructed us to come here," said a class-seven madrasa student from the capital's Rampura, seeking anonymity.

Dozens of children were seen engaged in clashes between pro-blockade and anti-blockade demonstrators at the capital's Gabtoli on December 9, the day opposition BNP enforced road blockade.

Immediately after violence between Jamaat-Shibir and police on December 22, leaders and activists of Awami League and its front organisations brought out processions at Shahabagh and Kataban area. Many children were seen taking parts here with sticks in hand.

National Human Rights Commission Chairman Dr Mizanur Rahman at a function on March 13 said protection of child rights is facing new challenges in Bangladesh as children are largely used in violent political movements now-a-days.

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Jamaat-Shibir engaged children and women at the forefront of its processions, rallies, road blockade and attacks on cops and minority communities, hartal picketing and other offences as human shield across the country.

The 11-year-old domestic help survived brutal torture by her employer in Dhaka. On September 23, two women rescued her from a dustbin at DOHS Baridhara in a serious condition as Aduri's employer Nowrin

Jahan left the girl there, after brutally torturing her.

Later police brought her to DMCH and after treatment for one and a half months there, she was handed over to her family on November 3.

Despite enactment of the Child Act 2013 in line with the UN declaration of children's rights and having strong policy to eliminate child labour from risky jobs, the country's children throughout last year were seen working in such hazardous occupations in different sectors.

In the later part of the year, the upheaval of political turmoil put the future of children across the country into a big question as continuous blockades and hartals forced educational institutions to reschedule exams on several occasions.

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ZYMA ISLAM

AMIDST the gloom of the deplorable condition of child's rights in this country, the year gone by brought one milestone, with the Child Act-2013 being passed.

The act outlawed the arrest of kids below the age of nine, sex work below the age of eighteen and keeping children in adult jails, among others.

However, more importantly, it set a crucial definition of the word "child" - according to the act, anyone below the age of 18 is a child, and is to be treated with special rights.

In a landscape where children are subjected to the same challenges as adults, starting from their pre-teens or even younger, this benchmark silenced all arguments about when a child is to be considered legally mature.

In August when teenager Oishi came in contact with law after murdering her parents, a call was made for an age determination test based on the Child Act to verify how old she really is.

Had the Child Act not been passed yet, Oishi could have been subjected to legal treatment reserved for adults, without being given the benefit of an age test.

It was concluded, however, that she is of eighteen years of age.

Nevertheless, while her case showed a precedence of the use of the Child Act in one instance, it violated the law in other instances.

The law has a strict prohibition on broadcasting the name and face of children who come in contact with law.

On December 3, fourteen year old Siam was killed by rubber bullets during a clash between an opposition led procession and the police, where the boy was marching along with the opposition.

Earlier in the year Asgar Ali Limon aged around 14 was killed in Chapainawabganj on April 24, Sazzad Hossain aged around 17 killed in Cox's Bazar and Rubel aged around 13 in Thakurgaon on February 28, Shahidul

having a normal life after having been popularized as a person who killed her own parents.

However, the act failed to outlaw the use - abuse - of children in politics.

In a scenario where children are regularly put in the line of fire by placing them in the front row of political rallies as cannon-fodder, the law was surprisingly quiet.

Can the Act be able to keep them happy?



Islam aged around 15 at Srikhanj on March 2, Akmal Hossain aged around 14 in Rangpur also on March 2, Rafiqul Islam aged around 12 in Rajshahi on March 3 and Mahfuz Hossain aged around 15 in Sirajganj on March 4,

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It was also proved that madrasah children were used to swell the ranks during the violent march by Hefazat-e-Islam in May.

The Act is also silent on the corporal punishment of children in schools despite the widespread prevalence of this phenomenon in the country.

Earlier this year 60 children injured by caning at a primary school in Sirajganj on June 10, while a child was tortured by teachers at a madrasah at Jamalpur on June 16, and hand of child was broken by teacher at Joypurhat on May 2.

Shortage of teachers hinders children's education

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

THE year began on a merry note for children with every school-going child being delivered a laudable achievement for the government.

However the smiles soon vanished for many of them, as over the course of the next several days, their new textbooks were burnt to ashes as opposition activists set fire to hundreds of schools across the country.

Along with their books and schools, their dreams were burnt to ashes as well. With no school to go to, their school year and in many cases the prospects of their education, were blown away like ashes in the wind.

The official figure of the number of schools burnt by Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid is 531 as of January 8.

This level of mayhem was perpetrated in less than a week.

Among the 531 schools, 419 were primary schools. Many of the children have now been exposed to the risk of having to drop out of school thousand hours in a year.

For each primary school, an average of only three to four teachers are available, in case a teacher takes leave, a third or a fourth of the students in the school may be left without guidance.

The scenario of children's education over the past year also presents some gloomy pictures.

To begin with, the unavailability of teachers was still present as a major concern.

Last year more than 1.92 crore primary education students were being taught by approximately 3.95 lakh teachers, according to Directorate of Primary Education sources. This puts the teacher to student ratio at one teacher per 46 students - well below international standards.

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Oppression of children: Society yet to shed off the stigma

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

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girls, especially unmarried ones. Often, they are harassed on their way to and from work and school both physically and mentally.

Many girls bear the harassments without voicing any resistance because if they complain, the community inevitably ends up blaming the girl for "inciting" such behaviours.

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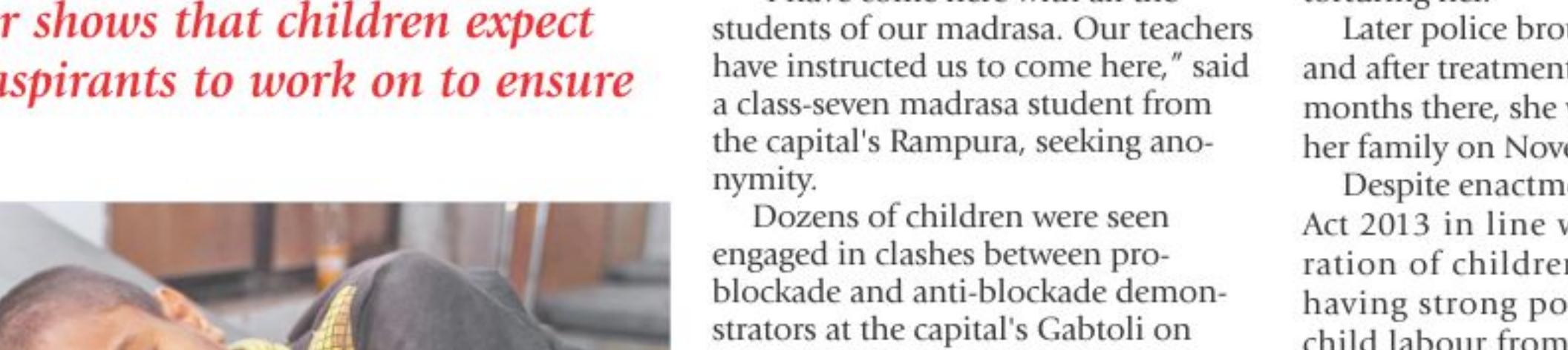
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and several hundred injured in clashes between Jamaat-Shibir activists and law enforcers across the country in October and November last year, according to news reports and statistics of AIN Salish Kendra.

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had been forced to participate or paid in cash or kind by political activists to take part in party programmes that often turn violent.

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