

## No respite in extra-judicial killings A betrayal of commitment

FROM diminishing incidents of extra-judicial killings have, of late, rather been registering an increasing trend. According to a local human rights watchdog, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), until February 10, some 44 persons have been the victims of extrajudicial murder and enforced disappearance. What is most repugnant is that the majority of those killed or made to disappear by force were members of the opposition political parties.

There is reason to be highly concerned over the report, since it involves murder of citizens, whatever their political identity, by lawmen under cloak and dagger circumstances. In this column, we have been consistently expressing our outrage against all kinds of human rights violation including, especially, extra-judicial killings at the hands of lawmen. Despite the widespread coverage and criticisms of these incidents in the media and by human rights watchdogs, both local and international, precious little has been done by the government to put a stop to such killings and instances of enforced disappearance. Worse still, the government has rather been receiving these reports with its characteristic denial mode.

Ironically though, the AL government had in 2009 committed in its manifesto to bring an end to custodial deaths and the so-called cross-fires.

The government's failure to attend to these incidents with due seriousness has been read by the general public as its sheer insensitivity to the issue of security and safety in the lives of citizens it is supposed to protect. This state of affairs is not only unacceptable to the common public, but also puts the national image to dispute globally. Unless effective steps are taken to curb such abominable abuse of power, we will be castigated as a country with the least respect for the rule of law and sensitivity towards the sanctity of human life.

## Poor performance at DITF Purpose largely defeated

THE Dhaka International Trade Fair is an annual showcase for Bangladeshi products and exportable goods. However, this year saw only a marginal presence of locally manufactured products, which actually defeated the main purpose of the fair. This poor turn-up of prospective foreign buyers resulted in generating business volume roughly 50 per cent less than the preceding year, with export contracts down to Tk804 million compared to Tk1.57 billion last year. It is not only that the fair organisers were confused about the purpose of the exposition. Not only were there instances of lower grade products finding a foothold in the fair, many local products did not get space due to financial constraints.

It is also crucial that we start diversifying our markets, especially when zero-tariff barriers exist in the Asian region. With the government eying an export market worth some US\$50 billion per annum over the next five years, time has arrived to take more proactive measures in finding ways to generate interest in our products internationally. However, unless the ground rules change with regards to political players holding the economy hostage when engaging in agitation, little can be achieved in bettering our prospects as a stable country to do business with. The search for markets will have little impact if we cannot break out of the vicious mindset of grinding to a halt all economic activity every time the political scene heats up.

## Bangladesh belongs to its children

ALAMGIR KHAN

THE first line of the introduction to the National Children Policy 2011 is, 'Children constitute the foundation of a nation.' Do the policy makers understand the full import of this statement? The last line of this part states that the contextual importance of this policy has to be taken into due consideration in making all national development policies, planning, programme implementation and budgeting. The concluding line should have rather carried the message that interests of children must be put at the forefront in making policies, planning, implementation and budgeting.

William Wordsworth had exclaimed: 'The Child is father of the Man.' The authors of this children's policy began with nearly what the poet said more than two hundred years ago. Then they drifted away, like policy makers cannot but do.

The full import of that statement can be that children are father of a nation. Really, to whom will Bangladesh belong in 2041? Not the present political leadership; today's children or adolescents will be at the helm of the nation then. But those political leaders who will survive till then will have today's children ask them: 'What did you do for us?'

President Obama, in his State of the Union address, imagined: 'And when our children's children look us in the eye and ask if we did all we could ...'

For children of the wealthy in Bangladesh, who have the shining prospect of emigration, there will be the worried western leaders to answer their question. But children of the poor and working people of this country will be here demanding an answer from you, if, however, you at all care about this.

Have you done anything to make sure that 'our success should depend not on accident of birth,' and will you be able to boast then like Obama today that the daughter of a factory worker is CEO of the largest automaker, the son of a barkeeper is Speaker of the House, and the son of a distressed mom the president? It depends only on what we are doing for today's children irrespective of their family background, the accident of birth. What 'ladders of opportunity' are we building for them? VIPs can at least line the roadsides to salute our children while they go to school.

The writer is Research and Publication Officer, Centre for Development Innovation and Practices.

## The caravan must move on

### GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

THE Dhaka Forum, which we have been informed is a new group of retired professionals and senior citizens, has got it all wrong. Contrary to what it thinks, the last general election was not a farce. This government is not illegitimate. The re-elected government is not hanging on to power. You do not dismiss an election as a farce because a political party chooses to boycott it. A government does not lack legitimacy when it decides to uphold the constitution. And farce is when democracy is stifled and yet elections and referendums are contrived in order for a cabal of individuals to perpetuate itself in power. Nothing of the kind happened in January this year.

A former governor of the Bangladesh Bank has informed us that this government, despite its electoral return to power, is not accountable to the people. And would it have been accountable if it had succumbed to pressure? There are or could be a whole number of reasons for people to disapprove of some of the acts of the government before the election, but to suggest that it is unaccountable, that it approximates regimes resting on the basis of coercion, is rather wide of the mark.

A former ambassador has tried to persuade us into believing that the new Jatiya Sangsad lacks legitimacy because it was elected through an absence of voters. Let us go into a very moral question -- and morality is what some people have been talking of for weeks now -- about the election, indeed about politics. In a democracy, you do not have any fixed number of people who must vote before an election can acquire credibility. And democracy does not say -- and neither does the constitution -- that elections cannot be held because a political party has threatened to stay out of it. So what do you do when in a perfectly democratic system a government has finished a term in office and wishes to go before the electorate again? Pluralism has little room for petulance. The law does not have to cringe in the face of agitation by men and women who have never been serious about parliament.

Despite what the Dhaka Forum suggests, Bangladesh is not at a crossroads. It would have been had elections not taken place, had murder and mayhem on the streets forced the ruling coalition into submission. And here is one other point that calls for a rebuttal: the former diplomat presenting the keynote paper at the deliberations thought the election was a deviation from the spirit of the War of Liberation. And what was that spirit? Simply that constitutional continuity will be maintained in the true spirit of democracy. The spirit of 1971, we will remind everyone yet

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once again, was undermined when military dictatorship put the knife into the noble ideals of socialism and secularism in the constitution, when the enemies of Bangladesh were told they could pursue politics in a country they had tried to force into abortion forty two years ago. Why did no one from the Dhaka Forum make any reference to such past misdeeds?

Democracy, it was put across at the discussion, had been put at risk through the manner in which the election was held. That is a bit rich coming from people who said nothing back in 1975 when a constitutional government was overthrown violently, when some individuals eager to 'save' democracy felt little or no qualm about linking up with Khondokar Moshtaque and his Democratic League. These men, and others like them, said not a word when the assassinations of 1975 were given legal sanction through the indemnity ordinance and the assassin majors and colonels stayed beyond the reach of the law for twenty one years. We lived in shame all those years. And these men looked the other way.

It is sometimes quite enlightening to have wisdom come our way from men who have served as advisers to some caretaker regime or other. But here's a truth: when the Awami League-led alliance assumed office in early

2009, the discovery was made that thousands of school textbooks had failed to go into the hands of children across the country -- because those responsible for the preparation of the textbooks had not done their job. It was left to Nurul Islam Nahid to do what his predecessor should have done. The lesson, an ancient one: do not pelt others with stones when you inhabit a glass house. Move on, to that other participant at the dialogue who did not think twice before insinuating that the present government, because it 'lacks' legitimacy, must depend on foreign powers for survival. It is an old argument, first fashioned in pre-1971 Pakistan and then put to good use by the proponents of 'Bangladeshi nationalism.' It is an irritant, but you can ignore it for the puerile sentiment it happens to be.

The saddest part of societal reality in Bangladesh today is the decline of a class of intellectuals in the country. The people, they will tell you, are more important than the constitution. Of course they are. Change or amend the constitution, they say, and things will be fine. Ah, but why must the constitution, because it has been flouted and changed and amended so many times in these four decades plus, keep going through the same humiliation for years on end? Why must the albatross of a caretaker system be made to hang around our necks only because we need 'inclusive' elections?

But, then again, some people will go on quibbling. Let them. The caravan must move on.

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## Entrepreneurship key in growing jobs, fighting poverty

CURTIS S. CHIN

**A**CROSS South and Southeast Asia, nations are doing what they can to better prepare their businesses and their citizens to compete in an increasingly interconnected world. The challenges are vast and varied.

From top-ranked Singapore to lowly-ranked Laos, the ease of doing business is all across the board. While Singapore held on to the No. 1 ranking for ease of doing business, Bangladesh was ranked No. 130. That meant doing business in Bangladesh was even more difficult than in Pakistan (110), but easier than in India (134).

Rounding out the "Top 5" for worst in Asia in the *World Bank 2014 Doing Business* report -- the latest annual assessment of the ease of doing business in economies around the world -- are Timor-Leste (179), Afghanistan (164), Laos (159) and the Marshall Islands (156).

None of these nations though should take heart in the report: "Well, at least we're better than Myanmar or Somalia."

Indeed, when it comes to doing business, there are few places worse, it seems, than the likes of Myanmar, unless you make your way to parts of Africa. That's at least, according to the World Bank, which has Myanmar ranked as worst in Asia -- at 182 of 189 economies -- on the ease of doing business.

Clearly, investing in Somalia is not for the faint hearted. The World Bank report once again skips Somalia entirely, with lawlessness and lack of reliable data no doubt two of the factors why Somalia continues to be absent in the rankings.

Yet, just as in the Top 5 ranked economies for ease of doing business --

Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand, the United States and Denmark -- there are lessons to be taken even from Somalia on how best to grow economies and address persistent poverty, whether in Africa or in Asia.

More than ever, given dwindling government budgets and reduced foreign assistance dollars, the private sector -- whether brave entrepreneurs, small- and medium-sized enterprises or well-established and deep-pocketed corporations -- can play a critical role in fighting poverty.

With well-thought through partnerships, such efforts can be done in a way that is quite frankly good for business -- and be more sustainable than aid packages subject to donor fatigue and annual budget cuts.

Just ask Alisha Ryu and David Snelson, the two American business pioneers first spotlighted by me in *Fortune*. The two entrepreneurs are behind a Mogadishu guesthouse and security firm, which employs nearly 40 Somali men and women, and by a conservative estimate, indirectly supports another 400 extended family members.

Ryu, a former combat journalist, and Snelson, a retired US army warrant officer, have been living and running their business in Mogadishu full time since 2011. Last year, the US news program 60 Minutes described their role in digging up and returning to the US

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