

Incidence of abduction

Old blame game, no new action

BEFORE we could overcome the shock of the gruesome killing of the seven abductees there was yet another abduction in Narayanganj yesterday. And this area has been swarming with law enforcing agencies including several platoons of BGB in the aftermath of the discovery of the seven dead bodies on Wednesday. It seemed as if the abductors were mocking the law enforcers.

We are afraid the state minister for home is totally out of sync with reality when he says that there is nothing to be panicky over the current law and order situation, and that the number of abductions now is not as high as in the past. We feel it is imprudent to delve into statistics when it has to do with the lives of people.

The incidence of abduction is unacceptable, and the performance of the law enforcing agencies has been extremely shoddy to say the least. And it does little for public morale when one hears comments from police top brasses that the number of abduction in the western world is much more than in Bangladesh. This is at best cynical and at worst out of place. If the number of abductions in the West is high so are the number of arrest and conviction. Can we say the same in our case?

No government worth the salt can allow such a situation to continue. To our horror the PM indulged in her old habit of blaming the opposition, in her May Day speech on Thursday. The BNP chief returned the favour. Such blame game will not wash with the public. The government cannot shrug its responsibility.

Helpline to farmers

Make it user friendly

IT is heartening to note that the government has installed an online site to ensure balanced use of fertiliser in farmlands. This is aimed at increasing productivity by some 20-30 percent. With the decline in farmland by more than 68,000 hectares per year, raising productivity is the key challenge.

We, therefore, welcome the government's step drawing on a software developed through extensive soil tests to identify specific fertiliser requirements in different regions. Kudos to Soil Resources Development Institute (SRDI) and Catalyst for jointly developing the software.

The major drawback in fertiliser use has been the farmers' overuse of the input thinking that it will increase yield. Actually this has proved counterproductive. But we have some issues with implementation. The farmer has to furnish location of his land, its size, crop category or type and the fertiliser he plans to use in a given form to be fed on to the system. Then he will receive recommended doses of fertiliser. In other words, he needs basic training of how to go about it. With his lack of functional literacy, he would need to be helped through the process by a designated computer-savvy extension worker.

However, farmers can visit union information service centres or Grameenphone's community information hubs to receive required information. Baglalink and Grameenphone subscribers can also get the service at numbers 7676 and 27676 respectively. A new awareness building campaign will be key to success of the overall

Signs of helplessness

EDITORIAL: *The Hindu* (India)

AS Ukraine slides steadily towards civil war, the sanctions announced by the United States and the European Union go further than previous attempts but show no results on the ground. On April 28, Washington announced measures against companies, officials, and wealthy businesspeople with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin's government, and the following day the European Union announced sanctions against 15 Russian and Ukrainian officials including General Valery Gerasimov, Russia's chief of military staff, and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, who is tasked with developing Crimea, the Ukrainian province annexed by Moscow on March 1. Among the Ukrainians named, presumably for asset freezes and travel bans, are the pro-Russian Igor Strelkov, an adviser to Crimean Prime Minister Sergei Aksyonov, and Sergei Tsyplakov, reportedly the head of the People's Militia in Ukraine's Donbass region. The US sanctions are wider than the European ones, targeting businesses and individuals; 17 companies are involved, mainly in oil and gas, construction and finance. The most notable target is Igor Sechin, president of the Russian state-owned oil giant Rosneft; the financial services firm Visa will have to suspend credit card services to Bank Rossiya and other banks.

The sanctions, however, are less severe than they look, and could cause problems for western firms, which may be able to keep shares in Russian companies whose senior personnel are under sanctions but may be banned from contact with such executives. This could hit BP, which owns 19.75% of Rosneft and has faced huge costs since its 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico; its first-quarter profits are down by 24%. Other firms with Russian interests include Chevron, ExxonMobil, and Shell; in addition, the Russian quasi-state conglomerate Rostec, whose head Sergei Chemezov is under sanctions, manufactures components for Boeing, and a Russian regional airline is set to buy Boeing jets. As for Visa, cardholders will be able to withdraw money. The US and the EU may want to block Mr. Putin's apparent plan to redraw Ukraine's eastern border, but Moscow could retaliate with its own sanctions, particularly in oil and gas transactions. Secondly, events in eastern Ukraine are now out of Kiev's control. On April 28, the pro-Kiev Mayor of Kharkiv, Gennady Kernes, was shot and severely wounded; separatists have occupied regional administration buildings in Luhansk, and the government airbase at Kramatorsk has been repeatedly attacked. The western bloc may so far have avoided stating preferred solutions, but its own impotence over Ukraine is increasingly obvious.

The charade and bluster over GSP

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE Rana Plaza disaster killed 1,100 garment workers, a tragedy that was the product of a long period of policy paralysis and neglect. It has finally led to some soul searching and a glimmer of hope for a better future for that vital industry has appeared. But we have a long way to go and one should have thought this is where policy makers would devote their energy.

It looks as if there are far more important matters that have been occupying the policy maker's minds instead: things like the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) of the US, and the alleged discriminatory policies of the country towards Bangladesh exports. For their part, US policy makers, so keen on making policy for Bangladesh, wish the country to pay more attention to workers' rights, especially their right to form unions.

There is, however, no GSP on offer from the US. The System simply does not exist. It expired in 2013, on July 31 of the year, to be more exact. The country could not possibly offer something that it does not have. The GSP, begun in 1976 in the US, is given for a certain period of time, ten years at the start of the scheme, and periodically renewed. Not much before its latest expiration, the US suspended Preference for Bangladesh, citing the country's failure to take steps to offer "internationally recognised workers' rights to workers in the country" in the words of the US president. One can question the sincerity of the US in promoting formation of workers unions, given the abysmally low proportion of unionised labour in the total work force of the country and the open hostility to unionisation in some of its states. To scupper the Preference scheme for Bangladesh on that count alone looks suspiciously insincere, if not hypocritical. Not that Bangladesh can or should escape the responsibility to actively promote healthy trade unionism on its own.

But could the US give Bangladesh its Preferences back quickly if Bangladesh takes some bold and credible step on the workers' rights front? No. It will take a while for US Congress to extend the GSP beyond its last expiration date. In fact, given its recent record as a legislative body -- its performance is said to be among the worst in its history -- it will be quite a while.

On the other hand, should Bangladesh continue to bemoan the loss of its GSP eligibility? How important is it for the country? Exports of the country to the US under the expired GSP were a tiny fraction of its total exports to the US. The figure perhaps works out at under 2% of the total. That makes the fuss around it such a charade. Bangladesh's most important item of exports, garments, does not come under GSP at all

And yet the ghost of GSP of the US kind (there are other, living ones, see below) stalks thinking. Hence we hear from the minister concerned that, far from getting a GSP-like near-zero tariff treatment, Bangladesh, a Least Developed Country, is being grossly discriminated against

by the western world, especially the US. There can be little doubt that there are many things in international trade relations that can be considered unfair. But pointing to the average rate of import duty on Bangladeshi products in the US and comparing them with duties charged by the country on imports from other sources is not meaningful. (China and India are brought in from comparison, along with, strangely, Germany. [Data from Bangladesh Ministry of Commerce, reported in *The Daily Star*, April 29]) Imports from Bangladesh are taxed on average at 16% in the US, according to government data, while a country like China gets away with only 3%, India just over 2% and Germany a mere 1%.

Do these numbers suggest gross discrimination against Bangladesh? Not really. The relatively high import duty paid by Bangladesh is a reflection of the very high proportion, perhaps about 95%, of the total exports that is accounted for by garments. These items of import generally get clamped with higher taxes, often much higher than do other manufactured imports. Countries heavily dependent on garments exports thus end up with high taxes. (Note that Germany does not export too many shirts to America.) Exports of shirts from Bangladesh are not generally discriminated against: Just about the same duty is imposed on Bangladesh-produced shirts as on shirts of the same quality coming from, say, Indonesia. There may be exceptions.

The loss of GSP status with the US and the apparent high rates of duties on the country's exports seem to have so unsettled people in high policy circles that they have started to say things which are untrue and misleading. Concerned ministers have said that Bangladesh pays huge amounts in taxes to the US on its exports of garments to that destination. Figures quoted include \$828 million in taxes paid to US customs last year and \$3.38 billion over the last five years since 2009. (*The Daily Star*, April 29). Actually Bangladesh does not "pay taxes" to the US; it is the US importers, and in the final analysis, US consumers, who pay the taxes. That is how, as all students of elementary economics know, governments imposing an import duty discourage consumption of the item taxed, often in favour of domestically produced items.

Bangladesh should take heart that the European Union, the other big export market of the country has quietly renewed its own GSP in January this year. The country should be diversifying its exports to take full advantage of that preference scheme. And the EU's GSP covers just about all exports from Least Developed Countries like Bangladesh -- all except arms -- including (unlike in its US counterpart) ready-made garments.

Our policy makers should really be going back to Rana Plaza and start building a healthy and enduring garments industry, rather than moaning about discrimination and loss of a defunct, tiny, preference system.

The writer is a former United Nations economist.

Predatory elites and embattled citizens



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE residents of Dhanmondi residential area of Dhaka metropolis may be heaving a temporary sign of relief after the reclaiming of Dhanmondi playground for the public. While the Dhaka City Corporation has made it publicly clear that the ground is open for supposedly unfettered public use, one can also see the ongoing disputed construction work started by a private club. The ground reality being what it is now, nobody knows for sure if public interests would be effectively protected against the so-called elite interests.

The neo-elites of our society do not appear to realise the significance of social assets that mean a robust self-organising civil society deeply engaged with the everyday life of its communities. They also do not appreciate the value of our cultural assets as also the physical heritage, and the distinctiveness and vibrancy of its cultural life.

The club frequenters or the so-called elites have perhaps no eye for the environmental assets that includes those qualities of the physical environment that are essential for sustaining life itself; such as the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the capacity of the land to sustain permanent human settlement. The land grabbers do not want the city to be truly livable because they do not visualise any partnership with organised civil society.

To state the obvious, a vibrant society will invest in people, not only in hardware. A city needs to promote a form of social mobilisation that gathers public support because the outcomes will benefit the many, not merely a few. Private capital investments coupled with insensitive actors will lead to uneven or often grossly uneven access to basic human needs like health facilities, places of recreation and the possibility of good neighbourliness.

In Dhaka metropolis, in matters of urban planning, area-based approaches have been shown to benefit mainly the better off, thus not confronting the need for equity. In our case, as elsewhere, sustainable development must mean balancing the fulfillment of human needs with the protection of natural environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present but also in the indefinite future. In practical terms, this means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Dhanmondi playground episode brings into sharp focus the issue of appropriate use of land that results in achieving health and hygiene. This objective is reached by providing social infrastructure like community centres, parks, and playgrounds and also keeping pollutants in different forms at their lowest possible scale. There has to be a proper connection between residential areas and community-oriented facilities. Mention must be made of the imperative of aesthetic development that may be achieved by taking as many advantages as possible of the

natural conditions surrounding the township.

Our new elites need to know that ownership of civic work lies with citizens in the community. While a municipality must provide the general educational and funding support, only the direct involvement of citizens will achieve the requisite level of support necessary for a non-coercive, voluntary process of conflict resolution. Ownership and participation must mean a comprehensive system relating to all segments within an urban environment.

One could argue that conceptually, prevention is the work territory of the community. It is an area that is not full of regulations and certification requirements. It is not a terrain of professionals or professionalisation. The more citizens actively exercise their civic functions within the realm of prevention, the greater is the social cohesion within their community. In disorder and community-decline studies, the issue of civic participation and bonding is identified as an important factor in what determines whether a community can maintain forms of informal social control or not.

In fact, civic work and commonality of work interests serve as social bonds that are pervasive. In many respects where community ends, law and regulatory schemes begin. The more the need for formal law is lessened, the



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better it is for flowering of civic functions. In a democratic society, greater social cohesion and community harmony are manifest when actions that qualitatively improve the community are voluntarily undertaken by citizens.

It would not be unreasonable to argue that all prevention work falls within the ambit of civic rights associated with citizenship within a democratic society. The vitality and essentiality of civic exercise is a keystone to the success of the democratic experience. The exercising of the civic roles serves to enhance the foundations of the democratic system. Interestingly, the performance of these roles is inextricably linked to violence and disorder prevention.

Our new elites need to know that citizens have the unique capacity to intervene in conflicts before the state is constitutionally allowed to do so. The community interacts with problems as they emerge and try to resolve them quickly, before they enter the formal justice system. Good citizens surely would not like to leave public cause to escalate into the after-the-fact justice system thereby only producing testimonials to the unfortunate absence of preventive community system.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Strengthen anti-adulteration drive

Anti-adulteration drive to check food adulteration should be carried out at regular intervals. Chemicals like formalin and other harmful substances are used to preserve fruits such as banana, mango, apple, grape, etc. When we eat these chemically treated fruits, we are at the risk of many diseases like cancer, liver and kidney diseases, stomach ailments and many other incurable diseases leading to death. Children are more vulnerable. Recently, in Kushtia, two children died from eating adulterated fruits and many people fell sick.

Though there are stringent laws in place, unscrupulous businessmen are flouting the laws because of lack of government monitoring and implementation of the laws. It is imperative that the government continues with the anti-adulteration drives so that dishonest businessmen do not dare to mix poisonous substances with our food items, and in case they do, it should be ensured that they get exemplary punishment.

Md Zonaeed Emran
One e-mail

Thymus in mice regenerated

Thymus is an organ found in mammals including humans which is located next to the heart. It controls the immune system of the body. The function of thymus decreases with aging resulting in production of fewer white blood cells called T cells, which play a central role in fighting infections. The researchers from the MRC Centre for Regenerative Medicine at the University of Edinburgh have successfully regenerated thymus in mice by manipulating DNA. They have rebuilt the organ in very old mice and the thymus started functioning like the one in young mice! This breakthrough can lead to a new therapy to help treat humans with weak immune system and protect against infections.

While congratulating the researchers of the University of Edinburgh, I sincerely wish their final success in regenerating the human organ within a short period of time.

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Stopping the brain drain

There is no dearth of engineers in Bangladesh. We have a good number of diploma institutes and UGC-approved private universities that are producing engineers. Then, why can't we construct quality buildings, bridges, etc.? Unplanned constructions all over the country are ruining our beautiful landscape.

Bangladeshi architects and civil engineers are planning and building beautiful structures in the western countries, but why can't they do the same here? Why are our engineers leaving the country? Don't they love the country? We need to find out our limitations and work hard to solve those. The government must ensure good job opportunities for our engineers. If they are well-paid, they may not leave the country forever. We must stop the brain drain at any cost.

Comments on news report, "Ties with US not comfortable," published on April 27, 2014

Aasfisarwar

Dear FM, are you comfortable with ties with your own people? Your government does not represent a great majority of the people of Bangladesh.

Hardreality

Government's mishandling of the Grameen Bank issue and the maligning campaign against Dr. Yunus has hurt our national interest to a great extent, which could have been avoided if the prime minister was not that inflexible.

SM

So, who is paying that 3.5 billion USD for BD products...US buyers...right?

Zman7

FM has spoken the truth, and as we know truth often hurts some people.

SM

Many times his truths were proven to be incorrect, so it does not hurt people that much.

"The nation fed cooked-up story" (April 27, 2014)

Mofi

These cold-blooded killers deserve similar treatment! Thanks TDS, for bringing out this intriguing fact and helping to unearth the truth.

Saint

We are always fed cooked-up stories.

OpeeMonir

It was an inside job; Zia and Manzur both were killed for a purpose. The nation must find out who the true beneficiaries were. One by one the great freedom fighters were eliminated with precise planning and meticulous homework. How are we going to write our history? What are we going to tell our future generation?