

Schools closed for minister's reception

Stop torturing our kids

IT seems that the bizarre practice of keeping schools closed, to accord reception to ministers or to force students to line up top greet ministers, will not stop. In a recent case, more than 200 primary schools of an upazilla in Khulna were given holiday to accord reception to the state minister for fisheries and livestock on Saturday.

Even weirder is the fact that this was done at the behest of all the primary school teachers of the upazilla. The Upazilla Primary Education Officer (UPEO) was a hapless onlooker who, according to his statement, did not want to go against the decision of the teachers.

We find the action of the said primary teachers as unacceptable as much as the argument in support of their action, i.e. the holiday was taken from the quota of the teachers, out of place. We wonder if it is within the remit of the teachers to declare public institutions closed, and if the defense proffered, the so called quota of teachers' holiday, can mean to suggest holiday en-masse on the same day by teachers. We also wonder whether or not the said state minister could have impressed on the teachers to organise the reception on a weekly holiday.

We had in these very columns repeatedly urged the ministry of education to take stern measures against those who initiate such actions. But nothing has changed. We would hope that the education ministry would take action to ensure that the routine of the schools did not fall prey to teachers' whim in future.

No dissent?

Freedom of assembly and expression impinged

IT can hardly be overstated that for more than a week now, the citizenry has been writhing in a dreadful sense of insecurity owing to a series of abduction and killing enacted lately with chilling impunity. In this compelling backdrop, leading citizens felt duty-bound to voice their protest peacefully with placards highlighting messages seeking an immediate stop to the diabolic crimes and deterrent punishment of the culprits. So they formed a human chain along with a cross section of people including members of the victimised families on Saturday in front of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. But early into their programme the police snatched away their placards and asked them to leave.

The police authorities claimed that because no permission had been taken, they could not let the human chain continue. The organisers refuted such claim saying that they had written to DMP for permission on Friday but the latter did not reply. In fact, eminent citizens said they held similar programmes on the venue without having to take any permission as long as they were confident of the peaceful nature of the programme. Yet, they had duly informed the DMP about the programme on Friday.

Indeed, the 'concerned citizens' did not give any cause for police action as they were completely peaceful in their protests, nor the placards contained any anti-government message to intimidate the authorities. Why then the police overreaction reflecting on an avoidable sensitivity to civic protests on the part of the government?

Accommodating cinema and theatre in school

ALAMGIR KHAN

STUDENTS of Class IX, X, XI and XII in our country read novels and dramas as part of their Bangla subject curriculum. SSC students have to study one novel and one drama out of a few selected for them by the authority. There are other set of novels and dramas for the HSC students, out of which each student studies one novel and one drama. The novels are *Hajar Bachhor Dhore* by Zahir Raihan, *Surjo Dighol Bari* by Abu Ishaque, *Azad* by Kazi Abdul Wadud, and the dramas are *Kabar* by Munier Chowdhury, *Sirajuddaula* by Sikander Abu Zafar, *Bahipir* by Syed Waliullah for high school students. For Intermediate students, the novels are *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* by Advaita Mallabarmana and *Padma Nadir Majhi* by Manik Bandyopadhyay; and dramas are *Raktakta Prantar* by Munier Chowdhury and *Zamindar Darpan* by Mir Mosharrar Hossain. In the past, there were *Srikanta* by Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, *Abdullah* by Kazi Imdadul Huq, etc. for school and college students.

These are very good books and help the young people to gain a broad vision of life and society. These readings also lay a foundation for the capacity of enjoying great stories and literary works. Both light and serious writings are important for building sound mentality of a student. But one needs help from others to learn to read serious and classic books. This is one of the reasons that schools and colleges include those novels and dramas in the curriculum.

The same is true for cinema, theatre and other branches of arts. One needs to acquire the understanding and increase it gradually, and that may require help from experts. Most of those novels have been turned into films and most of those dramas have been staged at some time by some troupe. Computer facilities are now available in many schools and colleges. Films can be carried easily in a pen-drive. Nowadays, multimedia facility is also available in remote parts of the country. These films can be screened in education institutions, which can be mandatory for students to watch. There are theatre groups in most upazillas. They can be supported and instructed to stage those dramas for schools and colleges. Afterwards, there should be discussion on those between students and teachers. It will help students not only to learn about good movies and dramas, but also to help them in studying those books. This can be done with the minimum efforts by the authorities, but the outcome will be enormous.

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The people feel vulnerable

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
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EXPERTS are of the opinion that of all the threats to a nation's security, the greatest stems from the state itself. And that is so because of what the state does or fails to do. More specifically, it is what the government, which runs the affairs of the state, does and does not do primarily in respect of the safety of its citizens, which poses the greatest threat to a state. Needless to say, in recent times it is the safety of our citizens that has come under severe strain, given the occurrences of the last few weeks.

What has become brazenly clear is that the instruments/agencies of the government that are supposed to be the primary provider of physical security and that which in turn inculcates the sense of safety in an individual, has been utterly deficient in doing so.

While it has become amply clear that the state has lost its monopoly of coercion, and the non-state actors have assumed equal, if not more, expertise and strength to coerce the public, it seems that the state is willy-nilly losing its capacity to provide security to the people, which only it can do.

While we have been witnessing the continued culture of political intolerance, violence in the society and lack of accountability at all levels, culture of mutual blame game, what has hit the very fundamentals of good governance is the slide in law and order in the country.

It is atrocious when the administration launches into statistics and number crunching in trying to defend the increasing slide in law and order or trying to lessen the gravity of the situation by smugly suggesting that the incidences of abduction are restricted to only a few areas of the country. Severity of a situation is not correlated to the number of occurrences of a particular incident.

The recent spate of abductions and the general condition of law and order has severely sapped public confidence in the state agencies because of the demonstrated efficiency or lack of it, of the law enforcing agencies to tackle the phenomenon of abductions. And there cannot be a worse situation than when the action or inaction of the agencies, in certain cases, is perceived to have been responsible for the incident or as being complicit in the crime.

Look at the way the Narayanganj abduction and killing of a councilor, his associates and a local lawyer was handled. It is very difficult to understand how come



the two vehicles of the unfortunate victims came to be a hundred kilometers away from the scene of occurrence. To mangle to traverse a very busy highway with innumerable bottlenecks without being noticed by the police requires a Houdini act. With so much of technical developments it is hard to believe that the police were not alerted in the three to four hours that it must have taken the vehicles to travel from Narayanganj to Hotapara in Ghazipur.

It seems that the police visited the house of the prime accused after considerable deliberation, almost a week after the abductions. Why so? The justifications of police officials are garbled. What will a sane person make of the police statement justifying the delayed search of the premises of the prime accused Noor Hussain, that they did not conduct the search earlier because they were not sure if the alleged accused was there. So, were they sure that he was there when they conducted the search three days after the bodies were discovered? And what criminal would keep incriminating evidence inside the premises, that too as a big as a microbus, unless he had some sort of assurance.

Will the public be remiss to ask if the delayed action was deliberate, dictated or simply police incompetence? There is lot in what a police official said when asked why the police are quiet in these matters even when they know the truth. He said he may himself be a victim of abduction were he to delve into these matters.

The government says that these incidents are the work of the opposition to malign it. That may be so, but in the case of the seven killings, it must have taken a very clever person from the opposition to convince an Awami League supporter in Narayanganj to abduct and kill another AL supporter and his associates in order to malign AL!

There is a serious deficit of good governance at the moment. The fruits of good governance are the freedom to feel safe, to fulfill ones basic needs, to express peacefully without fear of death or incarceration, and a raft of other preconditions that make one's life worth living, of course all within the bounds of the legal norms. We hope the government will act to ensure these.

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RUBANA HUQ

FIGURES are varying. Four days back, the vice president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) said that 19 factories -- twelve in Dhaka and seven in Chittagong -- have been closed down due to structural flaws and almost 18,000 workers lost their jobs. Twelve days back, a study announced that almost 50,000 workers have lost jobs and 50 factories have faced closure. Another newspaper reported that 16 factories have been shut down so far and 11,500 workers are currently jobless, as per the declaration by the inspector general of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. What is the exact figure?

In an official list revealed by BGMEA two days back, the figure of factory closure comes to 9, and the number of factories facing suspension of work and further review is 11; 11,110 workers have lost their jobs in Dhaka and 3,215 have lost jobs in Chittagong. Another updated list is yet to be received. Out of the list, only one factory, which seems to have employed the highest number of workers, is Softex Cotton Private Limited which, according to the official list from BGMEA, employed 2,550 workers. Another factory that has closed down is Fame Knitwear Limited with 800 workers. These figures also vary as a newspaper reported on April 13 that 6,000 workers have lost their jobs in both these units, as a result of closure.

At this point, it is extremely important to get the figures right. A \$537 million shortfall in revenue earning from agriculture to ship building (including RMG) has just been reported. Therefore, what is most important is verifiable data in all sectors so that we can assess our progress, gains and damages.

Considering its size, it is regrettable that the RMG industry lacks research and data. The database that is now being demanded by Alliance and the one which is now being gradually filled up has almost no details. But luckily, the process has at least begun. Considering the size of the industry, the factories should have been classified long time ago. In terms of the word 'classification' we also need to be clear about what exactly we mean by it. When we refer to the 'tier' system, many of us generally refer to factories in terms of size and revenue.

Many groups have multiple factories and therefore it is natural for many manufacturers to have compliant buildings and also non-compliant ones. One thing is for sure: we need to acknowledge that we have unsafe factories and we need to do whatever it takes to make them safe or cease business in that particular unit. And no manufacturer is arguing about this. So it is evident that the entire industry needs to go through full audit and gain credibility on safety standards.

Now, who are doing the inspecting? Alliance has so far audited more than 450 factories, and is aiming to complete inspection of all 640 factories by July. Accord began inspection of around 1,600 factories in February and has audited more than 350 so far. The names of both the initiatives suggest that they are fully committed to continuing business in Bangladesh. Therefore, audits are necessary for them as otherwise they would not be able to cover their sourcing risks. A picture of protesters in front of any brand outlet in any city of the world may not spell immediate sales risks, but there are stock markets to be considered and, above all, market credibility is required to be in business.

The audits are covering basic issues that help assess the manufacturing units. The basic questions include onsite structural assessment that checks the as-built drawings, load plans, foundation performance concerns, water tank

placements, undocumented rooftop construction, seismic bracing -- meaning earthquake protection for non-structural elements -- etc. In terms of fire assessment, stair capacity and number, chamber storage and generator room, exit doors, emergency lights, stair discharge, railings, floor surfaces and occupant load are checked. However, the new rule is to also check for automatic fire detection system and fire alarm along with requirement of a fire safety officer on site. As for electrical assessment, electrical layouts are checked along with equipment maintenance and placement of substation/transformers/generators/fuel tanks, and whether the factory has sufficient labeling/markings indicating the exits and equipments, etc.

Out of all these assessments, the only one that is causing instant closure is the structural performance concern. For example, if there are considerable stresses on slabs and if there are cracks in the building, then that shop may have to shut down...instantly. The issue of lives being in distress does not call for any compromise. Therefore, a few factories have had to close down.

Once again, in no way are the audits extremely stringent and in no way do they call for instant remediation of all concerns. But if the audit team decides to close a particular factory or submit the findings to the review panel, BGMEA and the labor directorate must jointly jump into the case and offer and arrange instant technical assistance, including arranging Buet team inspections, within 48 hours of audits by Alliance/Accord. The compensation of workers also must be taken into full consideration. Alliance has just declared that it has allocated \$5 million compensation for workers of the factories that have been shut. The issue of compensation along with the amount must also be quickly negotiated with BGMEA's mediation.

It is important to remember that as soon as a factory owner declares closure he or she is bound to pay 120 days of salary as per labour law clause 26.1.KA. In case of layoff, 45 days salary needs to be paid, and this is extendable by 15 days during which period one-fourth of salary along with full house rent must be paid. These 15 days can also be further extendable but would require same compliance with regard to payment. If a four line factory has 500 workers and the salary comes to Tk.40 lac, then an owner would have to be ready with Tk.1.6 crore, along with a promise to remedy the concerns and comply with newer requirements within the next 3-6 months. The new requirements would cost him another crore at the minimum and remediation would depend on the extent of danger noticed by the auditors. For instance, the building of Softex and Fame would need structural remediation of about Tk.15 crore, as estimated by authorities. Not only are the workers out of work, the factory owners are also at a complete loss and have no idea about how to proceed.

The owner of Softex has sued the entire review panel (which reviewed his factory building and suggested closure) for \$100 million as he feels that the absence of the lead brand during the audit, the time of audit, and the process had loopholes. He is also facing endless cases from workers' end. He is so far friendless as manufacturers are also being cautious about siding with him, for fear that they may lose their stand with their brands. Brands will rightly audit us. But the point remains that we need to turn to ourselves and strategise on how to design our next moves in order to save the industry. And this initiative must be a combined one undertaken by the government, BGMEA and the manufacturers in distress.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reckless biking

In the last two years, the number of motorcycles in Comilla has increased 2 to 3 times than what it was before. Inexperienced people, especially young boys are driving bikes at very high speeds honking horns loudly. Indian bikes are smuggled into Comilla through the border. Prices of these bikes are almost half of their market price. Availability of low-priced bikes, ignorance of guardians and poor traffic laws are responsible for this situation. People here are now at high risk of accidents. Will the authorities look into the matter?

Md. Foyjul Islam
East West University

Train accident on Bangabandhu bridge

Thank heavens that the recent train accident on the Bangabandhu Multipurpose Bridge over the river Jamuna did not occur by the river side. The nine derailed compartments of the Drutojan Express train fell on the road side of the bridge.

I had the opportunity to pass through the bridge by train. There is no railing on one side of the railway track which is really risky and frightening. The train needs to move very slowly on the bridge as a precaution. The actual cause of the train accident is yet to be determined.

It is sincerely hoped that the authorities concerned would take necessary measures to ensure safety of the train and the passengers while crossing the bridge.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
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Rana Plaza a record of tragedy

The 1st anniversary of the world's deadliest industrial disaster has been commemorated on April 24 this year, recalling the horrifying catastrophe that struck at Savar in 2013. The Rana Plaza collapse had snatched the lives of over eleven hundred innocent garment workers and maimed other several hundreds. Over eight hundred children were orphaned.

Identities of around one hundred dead bodies remained unknown despite the DNA tests whilst some four hundred workers went missing. It is a pity to watch the blank faces of the crippled survivors for whom a dark future is waiting. A few hundred survivors and rescuers have suffered from PTSD (Post trauma stress disorder), a severe mental condition.

As we celebrate our achievement in the Guinness Records through lavish spending, we should also remember the man-made fatal record of Rana Plaza disaster, a villainous act of sheer irresponsibility and criminal negligence of a handful of selfish and influential capitalist owners.

A saddened citizen
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Murdered brutally, dumped into river," published on May 1, 2014

Deepjelejai

Who is to blame? Rotten politics of AL under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, undoubtedly.

Aasfisarwar

There is no difference between Shameem Osman and the law enforcing agencies in these days. They are birds of the same flock.

S.M. Iftakhar Rosul (Faisal)

How terrible! How tragic! Where are the law enforcers? Where is the authority? Where are the politicians?

Mahboob Hossain

Police definitely know the killers because they have the list of criminals of their respective areas, but did not take any action in time to protect the people who were abducted, as the government party people are involved with this killing.

Dr Abdul Qader

Probably now the government would pay proper attention (hopefully?). If no exemplary punishment is given to the abductors, there will be no permanent solution.

Dev Saha

If the finger is pointed at one man, why not deal with him with some firmness? How many lives need to be sacrificed? Anybody listening?

"Govt found not serious" (April 30, 2014)

SM

Supply the same groceries, meats, and fruits to Gono Bhaban and Bangabhaban for their 10 courses of meals.

Saint

It is one of the major problems in our country. We are going to produce mutated generations in future.

Taufiq

There are so many occasions when court summoned the respective authorities to explain their failure, but nothing happened after that.