

District 'food courts' virtually defunct

Make them functional

NEWS reports regarding the stagnant state of courts set up to act on complaints of food adulteration have surfaced amidst a growing fear of food adulteration by consumers. We note with distress the fact that even after the government had set up these courts on an order by the High Court, they have remained inactive for the last sixteen months. The law ministry has claimed that it has not received even a single complaint from the 'food courts' and thus culprits have been able to escape punitive measures. We are also disheartened at the lack of initiative on the part of the administration to raise public awareness about these courts. Due to a lack of awareness, consumers are often left without any avenues to pursue the matter when they encounter adulterated foods.

At the moment, food safety is a serious concern for the nation with toxic chemicals being used to lace many edible substances in order to lessen the costs of production or enhance shelf life. We feel that the government is obliged to provide adequate resources to the district 'food courts', which includes assigning designated food analysts who will play an integral role in analysing complaints and pushing the cases in courts and creating heightened awareness of the court's existence.

The government's lax response to a judiciary directive has meant that not only has there been an inadequate supply of resources, but whatever resources have been allocated is wasting away. We hope the authorities take note of this fact and work on mobilizing these courts in order to ensure that the consumer gets undulterated foods.

Yet another level crossing accident

Can't anything be done to prevent these?

THE unmanned level crossings have become virtual death traps. In less than a fortnight two accidents at unattended train crossings have cost more than a dozen lives and caused injury to more than sixty people. The latest occurred on Saturday killing 3 of a family when a locally engineered three wheeler was rammed by a train on a level crossing at Yasinpur in Natore.

The statistics of death and injured due to train-vehicle collision at unattended level crossings is indeed distressing. Reportedly, on the average nearly forty such accidents occur every year resulting in nearly 30 deaths. Even more distressing is the fact that more than 80 percent of the existing 2,500 or so level crossings are illegal. And of the legal level crossings only 15 percent is manned. Little wonder that there are so many accidents.

Over the past several weeks the media have been highlighting this issue in the wake of several such accidents one after the other. No palpable corrective measure has emerged from the railway authorities in this regard.

Admittedly, there are several causative factors, and the railway authorities must delve into these instead of taking refuge of shortage of manpower and illegal crossings. It is for the railways to make up its manpower shortage. It is unacceptable that legal railway crossings should be without gatekeepers. We suggest long and short term measures be worked out quickly, and something must be done with the illegal crossings immediately. There is also need for public awareness and also for severe punishments to gatekeepers for negligence because many of these mishaps happen due to dereliction.

America back in Iraq

EDITORIAL: THE STATESMAN (INDIA)

BARACK Obama has stunned and confused America and the world. Three years after the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, America has sent aircraft to bomb fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in a desperate attempt to stop their advance on the Kurdish capital, Arbil. Ostensibly, the president is anxious to forestall what he imagines could be a "genocide" by protecting the minority Christians and the Yazidis of northern Iraq, a segment that practises a different variant of Islam; no less crucially, he is intent on protecting America's economic interests in Kurdistan, chiefly the Iraqi oil hub. In terms of geopolitical strategy, Mr. Obama has effected a reversal of what they call the 'dumb war' platform that had propelled him to the presidency in November 2008 and yet again four years later. Effectively, he is the fourth president to join the league of George Bush (senior), Bill Clinton, and Mr. Bush (junior) to order military action in Iraq. From Libya to Iraq, he has not been able to restrain himself from intervening in conflicts overseas, pre-eminently towards the latter. The strategy is both the same and different; this time around, Mr. Obama has given himself a limited mandate -- "relief drops" of food and water and "targeted" air strikes... short of mobilising "boots on the ground." Yet the grim determination to bring the ISIS to its knees has been matched with the inaugural air offensive that coincides with his signal of intent to intervene in the conflict within Iraq. ISIS is said to be inching towards Baghdad, has put in place a Caliphate in large parts of northern Iraq, and has taken over a vast swathe of Syria. In a sense, Mr. Obama has worked on a readymade recipe for intervention.

More than eleven years after the search for the WMD that wasn't, Obama's America and David Cameron's Britain have conveyed the impression that they are partners in the latest (mis)adventure; while the USA has launched the air strikes against ISIS militants the UK has refused to rule out military support, offering technical assistance for now. Though the US president has pledged not "to be dragged into fighting another war in Iraq," the comity of nations shall not miss the timing of the air offensive. Specifically, when the militants have reached within striking distance of Arbil, home to American diplomats, military advisers, and officials of US oil giants. "In this case, I believe the United States cannot turn a blind eye," was Mr. Obama's raison d'être on Friday. The underpinning is intensely to protect the interests of America; it would be grossly presumptuous to articulate fears of what he calls "a potential act of genocide." The fear psychosis over WMDs didn't work. Nor may the "genocide" ruse.

Why this double-standard?

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE Obama administration's quick humanitarian response to the plight of the members of the Yazidi sect is remarkable. After the fall of Sinjar town in northern Iraq to the advancing jihadist fighters belonging to the IS (Islamic State), formerly called ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), about a week back, the Yazidi population that lived there fled for their lives to the Mount Sinjar. Given their (IS fighters') past record of cruelty towards people of other faiths, including sects within the broader Muslim community that they do not consider as Muslims, the mass exodus of the Yazidis from their ancestral homes is understandable.

Since it was beyond the capacity of the UN to send emergency relief to these helpless human beings -- some 50,000 Yazidi men, women and children -- the US came forward to save them with the help of both military might and humanitarian aid.

Alongside dropping food and water to the Yazidis stranded in the desolate mountain, the US military aircraft till Sunday made at least three bombing sorties on IS's troops and military hardware. Other Western powers have also promised similar humanitarian aid for those victims of IS committed atrocities. Such spontaneous show of sympathy for the suffering humanity in Iraq is undoubtedly praiseworthy on the Western powers' part. The question is are they equally spontaneous in their demonstration of fellow feeling to all people similarly subjected to manmade catastrophe, for example in Gaza?

Before going to Gaza, let us see who is primarily responsible for the situation now facing the Yazidis, the minority Christians and other Iraqi minorities. Needless to say, the Western powers, the US in particular, are largely to blame for the ongoing spiral of violence and chaos leading to Iraq's gradual disintegration. It is all traceable to the ill-conceived misadventure of Iraq in 2003 by the then US president George W. Bush to get rid of dictator Saddam Hussein. The corollary of this invasion has been the ever-widening sectarian divisions in Iraqi society, a natural offshoot of which is the creation of fertile ground for the rise and spread of the extreme and intolerant variety of jihadists that the IS represents. The 2003 Iraq invasion by the US, if anything, has successfully destroyed the foundation on which the former state of secular Iraq stood. So, it's hardly surprising that Obama has finally been compelled to re-engage his military in Iraq even though, as part of his policy to extricate his country from the mess of Iraq war, it's not long ago (in late 2011) that he withdrew the US army stationed in Iraq. But however much Obama may try to disengage, the bloody legacy of the past won't allow him to do so. So, he is there again, though on a limited scale

and scope, as Obama would like to stress.

The sad legacy of Western intervention is not limited to Iraq alone. The Palestinians in Gaza and West Bank are victims of similar interference in the affairs of the Middle East by the Western powers. Their creation, the state of Israel, after dislodging Palestinians from their ancestral homes, has long been (over the past six and a half decades) in hot pursuit of the Palestinians. Wherever they take refuge, Israel will be there with its tanks, missiles and planes to kill Palestinians in hundreds in their homes and work places, destroy their homes and communications infrastructure, giving rise to humanitarian crisis on a horrific scale. Sad to say, the US and other Western powers could not so far show the same sympathy to the humanitarian crisis being suffered by the Palestinians.

The recent situation in Gaza is a glaring example. During the last one month Israel has been indiscriminately pounding Gaza with planes, tanks and warships, killing hundreds of men, women and children in the name of chastising Hamas. The Israeli atrocities in Gaza dwarf the situation in Sinjar. And during last one month some 1,900 people, 98% of them civilians, have been killed, thousands injured, and hundreds of thousands have fled



PHOTO: AFP

their homes destroyed by Israeli bombardment to UN shelters. But they have no safety even in those shelters as Israeli planes target them, too. But president Obama has not sent any fighter planes to stop the aggression of the barbaric, marauding Israeli army and save defenseless Palestinians in Gaza. Neither has the US, nor any other Western power, thought of sending emergency relief to the endangered population of Gaza. Why is there this strange difference in the Western powers' attitude and outlook towards Palestinian people's sufferings? Are the Palestinians in Gaza less human than the Yazidis, or other minorities in Iraq?

The Yazidis being an ancient religious group, long persecuted and marginalized, deserve to be protected from the onslaught of IS force. But have not the Palestinians in Gaza as elsewhere been facing similar threats of marginalisation and extinction, and deserve sympathy and protection? Sadly, we have not heard any word of sympathy for these helpless people from the world powers. Why this double-standard?

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The "Selfies" of Labour

RUBANA HUQ

JUST read about a monkey taking a picture after it played around with British photographer David Slater's equipment. Wikipedia and Slater are locked in a battle, asking a basic question: who owns the copyright of this photo that was clicked by a monkey in 2011 with Slater's camera? Slater thinks he has the right; Wikipedia thinks an animal cannot have any copyrights vested in him. My question is, are we taking the case of the workers as "monkey see, monkey do" in our country? Are unions working as Slater and tugging workers to whichever direction that suits the unions the most? And who clicks the camera in this case? Labour or the Union?

For the most part of last month and the current one, we have been watching scenes in the media of workers in Tuba Garments in distress and have been reading about them. Neither does a camera lie nor is the viewer incapable of interpreting the expressions that were pasted all over the workers' faces. In hunger and desperation, they chose any and every voice that promised them allegiance and loyalty. They sided with promise. One must say a particular labour leader did a great job in this case. She went on a hunger strike. She called for a nationwide strike from last Saturday.

She spoke to a foreign journalist (which was leaked in YouTube two days ago) and shared with him the success of "her" particular union and the failure of others. Unfortunately, none of this worked all that much just because the workers truly were hungry and couldn't afford to go on an infinite unrest that would not have ultimately added to their advantage. Accepting a two-month salary was way better than indefinitely waiting and striking for the total package to be received "only" from the owner.

In the case of Tuba, while the aggrieved workers had solid, non-negotiable points, one needs to realise that no degree of mediation or coverage will ever be able to solve it unless the owners own the issues. Cameras can cover, activists may crowd the scene, unions may declare solidarity, but at the end it's still a case between the owners and the workers. The change has to come from within otherwise the stopgap disbursement of salaries, the intervention of industrial police, and the baton charging et al. can only act as a steroid but will never permanently cure the sector of its ailments.

An interesting book by Ha-Joon Chang, an economist from London School of Economics, reflects on the case of labour and brings in two movies as points of reference. The first movie is *Django Unchained* where Stephen, the character played by Samuel L. Jackson, takes the lead against the other slaves in perpetuating injustice. Slaves like Stephen exist in our societies where collectively a society internalises oppression and inequality, which coincides with what the Marxists call "false consciousness." There are many within us who believe that what the workers receive is just and apt and till we ourselves feel the extent of deprivation and misery, no external pressure can force us to balance our books. Another movie that Ha-Joon Chang brings into his discussion is the 1999 movie *Matrix*, where the Wachowski siblings created a character like Morpheme, who refuses to live under fall consciousness while Cypher,

another character finds the illusion of happiness acceptable. In our case, the owners may be going through the phase of "adaptive preference" in which we reinterpret situations and make them "bearable" by impacting the lives of the labour in a manner in which the workers are influenced to accept the "sourgrape" principle.

But this change cannot come into effect if the owners are defensive. Unfortunately, attacks on the entrepreneurs initially prompt defense. Therefore, your columnist strongly feels that no number of seminars will be able to change the mindset of the owners. Accusations like "BGMEA stands for the sub-contractors, who exploit the cheap labour force, and the politically-linked owners," will not change the scene. Public intellectuals need to address their concerns in a much more responsible manner. At the same time, for the interest of everyone, the owners need to paint a clear picture of potential opportunities and disasters that could very well either help or kill the sector.

Reality is, EU has turned out to be the biggest garment importer. In spite of China and Turkey leading the exporters' race, Bangladesh is continuing to increase exports to EU where, in the first three months of 2014, exports have gone up by 35% and market share by 18%. Also, in spite of remediation processes that will possibly cost more than \$200 million and take another 2 years or so to complete, the North-American Alliance members also are buying more products from Bangladesh, according to Ian Spaulding, a senior advisor to the group.

At the same time, let us not forget that China is again managing to offset fears about competitiveness as the Chinese manufacturers are now offering falling unit prices. Data reflects that average price fell 1.4% year-on-year in the last six months from January to June, as higher wages are being balanced by productivity gains. While we continue at our end with threats of strikes and disruption, the activists also need to understand the global reality on China being unbeatable in terms of the size of its supply base, multiple skills, quality, variety and supply chain competitiveness. Let's not also forget that an extremely business-friendly government is at play in India where the manufacturers have just pressed the government to conclude the EU-India free trade agreement, or alternatively provide export subsidies to the garment exporters. Bear in mind that the recent budget announcement of the Indian government declared helping the exporters out with increasing duty-free entitlement of imports of trimmings, embellishments and a range of other items from 3% to 5% of the value of the exports.

At a time like this, when Bangladesh is confronted with a myriad of to-do lists, the owners as well as the activists need to plan their strides with caution. The "selfies" that we click are all our own and no matter who stands with the camera equipment like Slater did, the portrait is ours to own, even if it is an ugly one. A cosmetic rescue won't help. A long telephone conversation with a foreign journalist enthusiastically informing him about the state of affairs also won't be of use. At the end of the day, it's our workers and it's our own land.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Police brutality against workers

The workers of Tuba Group were staging demonstration to get their outstanding salaries and bonuses. Policemen swooped on them and used tear gas and pepper spray. Is it the way to treat the ill-fated workers? These workers keep the wheel of our economy moving. They should be treated like human beings, not as a bunch of hooligans. Zabed Wali Chittagong

Bring back fugitive killers of Bangabandhu

I highly appreciate the news "No headway in move to bring them back" (The Daily Star, 3rd Aug. 2014) by Ashutosh Sarkar that there has been no significant progress in bringing home the six fugitive killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the government has apparently made no serious efforts to that end. On 15th August 2014, it will be thirty-ninth death anniversary of Bangabandhu and his family members. May I now ask the present government to force the taskforce to bring back the fugitive killers of Bangabandhu before it is too late? Jamshaid Taher Banani, Dhaka

Foreign words in ruling party's name

The present government is trying to introduce Bangla at all levels. However, the name of our ruling party is in a foreign language. 'Awami' is an Urdu word which means "of the people", while 'League,' an English word, means a collection of like-minded people or party. The Awami League can be called "Jonogoner Dol" in Bangla. Now the party may think about changing its name into Bangla. A Bangladeshi Dhaka

Comments on commentary, "A retrogressive policy," published on August 8, 2014

SM AL does not know how to honour democracy and people's rights.

007ISI

This commentary might not have been published, if the new broadcast policy was followed.

"Waiting for the dead" (August 7, 2014)

Afreen

Now our BIWTA, BIWTC, and police are busy searching for dead bodies! Why can't the authorities be strict in monitoring that no launches will be overloaded and drivers will follow weather forecast? We know there is shortage of vehicles. But isn't it better to wait rather than going home taking life risk? Our Eid vacation should start earlier so that people get more time to go home and come back.

"Strict monitoring, plenty of scope for misuse" (August 5, 2014)

Lipon Ghosh

It may not be an amendment. I think it is an attempt to choke the media.

Taslima Islam

First, the voters' rights have been taken away. Now the last nail in the coffin of democracy has been put with this so-called broadcast policy. Democracy is truly dead in Bangladesh. Would wait to see TDS's reaction to this policy.

Saleh Md. Shahriar

It is not clear how a piece of information will be assessed whether it is prejudicial to state security or not. The way of judging/assessing a piece must be open and transparent based on set principles. The common people will never accept any policy of the government that is mainly designed to limit the free flow of information. Media control in the name of policy is totally antithetical to the fundamentals of democracy.

"How Bangabandhu's name being abused" (August 6, 2014)

Ismail

Sad that some people have stooped so low.