

STRANDED IN IRAQ

Workers cheated, families shunned, minders maligned

C.R. ABRAR

BABA, amar polatore kebol aina dewar babosha koira dao" (son, just arrange the return of my son) was the fervent appeal of a seventy-year old mother clutching my hands as I alighted from the podium after a programme organised on December 3 at the National Press Club by the families of 180 Bangladeshi workers stranded in Iraq. Others around her, members of about four dozen families who attended the event, raised the same demand. Some were weeping aloud ceaselessly, others remained silent, their eyes conveying the trauma they were enduring, the ordeal of anguish and helplessness of not being able to do anything to bring back their dear ones from a situation of chaos and uncertainty, of hunger and physical insecurity.

The rally was organised as a desperate effort to inform the concerned authorities as well as the common citizens of the dire straits of the 180 Bangladeshi workers in Iraq. One after another parents, grandparents and siblings of victim workers came to the podium and narrated the ordeals that their loved ones are currently enduring in Iraq.

The audience heard that in most cases the workers were unaware that they were being taken to Iraq. In fact, an overwhelming segment claimed that agents promised them work in Qatar, a country now attracting a fair share of Bangladeshi workers in light of construction boom before the Soccer World Cup planned in 2022. They heard that agents charged the workers sums between Tk. 300,000 to Tk. 450,000 to secure the employment. They heard that soon after the workers landed in their unintended destination country they were taken to Najaf city at the construction site of Abu Torab Housing that subsequently went bust due to ISIL activities in the area.

The audience was informed that instead of organising alternative employment for the workers, they were kept in detention without adequate food, water and sanitary toilet facilities in a closed camp guarded by armed personnel. They said that any demand for better food, water and toilet condition resulted in verbal and physical abuse from their captors. They further said that finding little option they approached Rights Jessoro through the brother of an engineer who hailed from that town and was among the victims, and it was only after a prolonged struggle of the Rights Jessoro that the Bangladesh ambassador in Iraq visited the camp.

Although the ambassador asked them to wait while he worked out alternative work opportunities, sensing it was a ploy against bringing them back home, the

workers demanded immediate repatriation. The audience was further informed that in most cases local police stations refused to register cases that the family members wanted to lodge against the agents who facilitated their migration. The families remained resolute in their demand that their loved ones should be brought back home immediately and be adequately compensated for the losses they had suffered. The family members felt that, as every institution that was tasked to ensure the protection of the workers had failed to deliver, they had little option but to call on the prime minister to intervene.

Speaking on behalf of the facilitators of the event, the executive director of Rights Jessoro, an anti-trafficking crusader, highlighted how he went around from post to pillar to draw attention of the authorities to the plight of those

mitigating the suffering of the victims. He asserted that "powerful quarters are engaged in all-out effort to thwart any move to bring back the victims and are attempting to break the unity of the workers in the camps. They are also engaged in fabricating video footages to claim that the workers were well looked after." More worrisome was his allegation that the workers were coerced to give undertaking that all their dues were cleared by the employer.

The Right Jessoro chief took exception to the move by the Bangladesh ambassador in Iraq, who is on record for dissuading the workers to return home on grounds that they would never secure redress "by filing cases under the law as agencies would not be penalised and you (the workers) would not be getting any compensation." He chastised the workers: "You would be gone and so would you

with Iraq as the destination, there is a strong case to surmise that the recruiting agency and its sub-agents that sourced the workers never divulged the actual destination to the potential clients. It also indicates a collusion of BMET personnel with the recruiting agency as the clearance is meant to be issued after authenticating all necessary documents and interview of migrants.

Secondly, the recruiting agency breached the law of the land for charging several times more than the amount stipulated by the government. The statement of the ambassador that "you would not get more than Tk. 80,000 back as compensation" is testimony to the fact that the government was aware that the workers paid more than the sum fixed by the law.

Thirdly, the failure of the administration to act on the complaints lodged by the workers and Rights Jessoro for a period of more than five months is a glaring evidence of the systemic weakness of the institutions that have been set up to facilitate safe migration.

Fourthly, the unwillingness to launch a credible enquiry, let alone act and take penal action, against one recruiting agency that is responsible for immeasurable suffering of so many workers and members of their families raises a question about the intent of the administration to ensure accountability of the sector.

Fifthly, attempts to tarnish the image of Rights Jessoro and to inflict harm to the reputation of its chief executive indicate how powerful the vested interests are. In this context, the feature items in some dailies with questionable reputations and the propaganda orchestrated by the concerned recruiting agency accusing Rights Jessoro of funneling donor money to incite workers that are ardently espoused by some government officials is the case in point. This is a ludicrous claim given the fact that all NGO projects have to be cleared by the NGO Affairs Bureau after proper scrutiny, and there is little scope to have a slush fund of the scale suggested by the detractors. Finally, no less disconcerting is the complete silence of BAIRA on the issue.

A member of a victim family at the December 3 Press Club rally referred to the threat he received from a local *dalal*: "Our arms are long enough to bend every law." He stated that all along he firmly believed that it was the law of the land that had the long arm. He said that after his recent ordeal in dealing with the case of his brother stranded in Najaf he stood corrected. "Perhaps, the *dalal* was right" he conceded with a sigh.

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stranded in Najaf, Iraq. As early as July 9 he e-mailed the Bangladesh ambassador in Iraq and the managing director of the concerned recruiting agency. As little progress was made on those fronts he subsequently drew attention of the ministries of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, Additional DIG (organised crime), criminal investigation department, Bangladesh Police and Director General of the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training. A press conference was also organised in Jessoro that was widely covered in the local and national media, he said.

The Right Jessoro chief claimed that although the Ministry of Home Affairs took initiative of convening a special meeting of concerned government departments, little progress was made in

offspring before the verdicts (of the courts) are delivered under the laws of Bangladesh." The NGO head also alleged that a smear campaign had been mounted against him and his organisation that they were instigating the workers to return home at a time when the employer and the ambassador were trying to work out alternative employment for them. He also claimed that instead of instituting enquiry into the conduct of the errant recruiting agency he was targeted for investigation by the intelligence agencies.

The above narratives of the members of the families of victims and that of Rights Jessoro raise some pertinent issues. Firstly, most of the workers were taken to Iraq without their expressed consent. Although government and recruiting agencies claim that the workers' immigration clearance from BMET was secured

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A journey to the peak of the pyramid

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

as well as safety and security are of paramount importance. And, art is a deviant in their lives since they are overwhelmed by the daily struggle for livelihood.

I tend to disagree with this narrow interpretation of art. As an artist, I have always believed that art is a basic human need. Even if all other wants and demands are satisfied there will remain a level of discontent among individuals unless their spiritual needs are fulfilled through the arts. Truth be told, this is not an entirely new idea. American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) first propagated the notion of the pyramid of human needs with physical needs at the bottom rising through love, self-esteem and finally culminating in "self-actualisation." The last consists of what Maslow described as "peak experiences" constituting the "happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture perhaps from being in love, or listening to music or suddenly 'being hit' by a book or painting." He emphasised that the positive potential of a human being is fully realised only when he lives through these "peak experiences."

Maslow has been challenged by academics and researchers for not providing sufficient evidence for his theory and placing the individual above the society. I may be crossing some boundaries here (since I am not an expert on psychology) but I believe that Maslow's critics as well as those who question the benefits of "great art" would alter their views substantially if they were present in the Bengal Music Festival held in Dhaka last week.

About twenty to fifty thousand people thronged the Army Stadium to listen to classical music for five nights, until dawn's first light. The young and old alike sat through the performances with reverence and adulation. Every nuance was appreciated -- whether it was the languid yet intricate movements of Shivkumar Sharma's *santoor* or Hariprasad Chaurasia's delicate fingers coaxing a wide range of expressions on the flute. The eclectic mix of performances added to the richness of the event. Just as the audience was spellbound by Kaushiki Chakrabarty's mastery of the *Khayal*, it did not fail to celebrate the beauty of Kishori Amonkar's unique, soft style of vocal rendition. The opening *Bharata Natyam* number by Malavika Sarukkai mesmerised viewers while Vishal Krishna's technical mastery of pure *Kathak* delighted the spectators on the closing night.

For me, the Festival was much more than a mere art event. I was transported to a realm that I had never traversed before. In five nights I lived through five lives -- time rushed by and yet in some ways it stood still. The strength and power of the music transformed me to singer, dancer, instrumentalist even composer. At times my spirit danced with the intricate *bols* of a dancer's *Pakhwaj* while at other times my voice flowed through a *Dhrupad* maestro's *gammak* and *alap*. This connectivity created a sense of oneness with the artist and the audience, making us all a part of the whole.

For all this and more we need to pay a warm tribute to the Bengal Foundation and their sponsors. One could not help being awestruck by the grandiose scale of the entire show -- the stage, the acoustics and lighting, the artist selection and the impeccable arrangements. However, the Festival's most outstanding contribution was that the "peak experience" was made available to everyone -- not just the virtuosos and cognoscenti.

If one were to fault the organisers, it would be for the relatively large space and preferential treatment reserved for the "VIPs." For it was in this section that one noticed the greatest disruption. Some "distinguished guests" floated around at will, their loud cell phone conversations creating a discord in the musical ambience. In contrast, the ordinary folks sitting in the rear, under the cold November sky, listened in rapture and frequently inspired the performers with their sensitive appreciation and positive responses.

The phenomenal audience participation disproved the much-vaunted argument about the "exclusivity of classical music." It confirmed that no matter what our social status, age or sex, we naturally aspire for the rare moments when we can be uplifted to the peak of the pyramid of life's experiences, as Maslow described them. There was ample evidence to confirm that all of us are innately programmed to make beautiful music... if not with our voices or fingers or bodies, certainly with our souls!

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Bangladeshi small businessmen in Portugal

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I was in the seaside city of Cascais in Portugal and like all tourists, after a day of sightseeing, decided to take a walking tour of the city and its marketplace. As we stepped into a gift shop, the sales staff accosted us, and thinking we were Portuguese greeted us with a smile and a friendly "Olá!" I said Ola back to him but then something told me that he was not a native Portuguese. Since my knowledge of Portuguese is limited to hello, thanks, and a few other words, I knew I had to switch to English if I wanted to keep my touristic halo intact and not give away my true intention -- to window shop and just tag along with my wife. But I kept my eyes on the display of trinkets and souvenirs that one finds in any European city -- refrigerator magnets, banners, key rings, etc -- and check their prices since at the end of a few such intrusions I might be able to get a sense of the market.

Within a few seconds my original hypothesis that the two staff, one behind the counter and the other who had greeted me were from Bangladesh, was confirmed.

I was surprised that Bangladeshis were a visible presence in this part of Portugal where the language barrier and sluggish economic growth could keep them away from this corner of Europe. Portugal along with Greece had experienced an economic downturn in 2011 and 2012 (Portugal is one of the four countries banded together as PIGS [Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain]), and I later learned that the economic conditions had forced some Bangladeshis who had Portuguese work permits to move to other more robust economies in the EU, Germany, Denmark and UK (according to some estimates more than half of the documented Bangladeshis).

The Schengen border-free zone, launched by five countries in 1985 and incorporated into the EU in 1997, allows free travel within 13 EU countries (but not Britain or Ireland), plus Norway and Iceland. The minimum wage in Portugal in 2013 was € 556 per month, as compared with € 1,430, € 1,469 and € 1,470 in Belgium, Netherlands, and France, respectively. The monthly wages in both Denmark and Germany are twice these levels. Mr. Shahjahan, who has been in Portugal for more than 10 years and owns two restaurants which serve both

Indian and Italian food, indicated that it was hard for him to keep good staff since once they are trained in the art of hospitality, they leave for higher pay or move to another country. He now relies on his family members who provide the backbone of his managerial staff.

Coming back to the proliferation of Bangladeshi small businesses in Portugal, it would be fair to say that they fall under three main categories: small gift shops, convenience stores, and restaurants. These can be found in all major tourist cities including Lisbon, Sintra, Cascais, Porto, and the island of Madeira. What struck me as very encouraging during my conversations with the Bangladeshis, both entrepreneurs and workers, was evidence of hard work they put in and the ability to navigate through the various legal and ever-growing economic tentacles of Eurozone regulations. Some of the business owners who have made major investments in the last few years during the time of greater economic resurgence in Portugal, are bracing for a few more months of economic doldrums and slower tourism business during the winter months. Lay-offs, shortened working hours, and dipping into savings are some of traditional survival

methods. I actually met two couples, which established businesses, who were planning a trip to Bangladesh during the slow winter months and leave the staff in charge.

Bangladesh has a small mission in Lisbon which opened in 2012, but started full-fledged operations in 2013. I met with Mr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Portugal, who was very kind to mention the efforts of the Embassy to increase trade between Bangladesh and Portugal. He pointed out that Bangladesh participated in the Diplomatic Bazaar held on November 21-22 in Lisbon. Bangladesh Embassy Stall drew many visitors, including the First Lady of Portugal, Maria Silva, who was presented with books on our culture and economy. Finally, he mentioned two areas where Bangladesh might be able to expand exports to Portugal: fashion garments and knitwear. Portugal is very fashion conscious and draws tourists from around the world because of its history, culture and beaches. For Bangladesh, it provides an opportunity to strengthen our bilateral relationships.

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CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Poet Whitman
- 5 Tube tops
- 9 Egypt neighbor
- 10 Modify
- 12 Seize by force
- 13 Baseball manager Joe
- 14 Implore
- 16 Big racket
- 17 Language suffix
- 18 Chandler or Burr
- 20 "Silk-wood" star
- 22 Crumb carriers
- 23 Skilled
- 25 Cushy
- 28 Skin woes
- 32 Ballroom dance
- 34 Court worker: Abbr.
- 35 Road-house
- 36 New York university
- 38 Enticed
- 40 Not as green, maybe
- 41 Pickup, e.g.
- 42 Tinker-Chance go between
- 43 Match parts
- 44 Bears' lairs

DOWN

- 1 Most sagacious
- 2 Addict
- 3 Harp's cousin
- 4 Came to a point
- 5 "Aack!" sayer, in the comics
- 6 Commotion
- 7 Forgive
- 8 Quick run
- 9 Garage jobs
- 11 Cares for
- 15 Frolicked
- 19 Wrestling spots
- 21 Chow
- 24 Did the walls
- 25 Wading bird
- 26 They have titles
- 27 Dipping dish
- 29 Occur
- 30 Some solvents
- 31 Mixes up
- 33 Refractory sights
- 37 Exist
- 39 Fall mo.



CRYPTOQUOTE

CQM IMJLDP U CJGA CD YVLMGB UL
ZMHJNLM UY CQM DPGV DPM EQDLM
JPLEMIL U JHHMOC. -- SMDISM HJIGUP

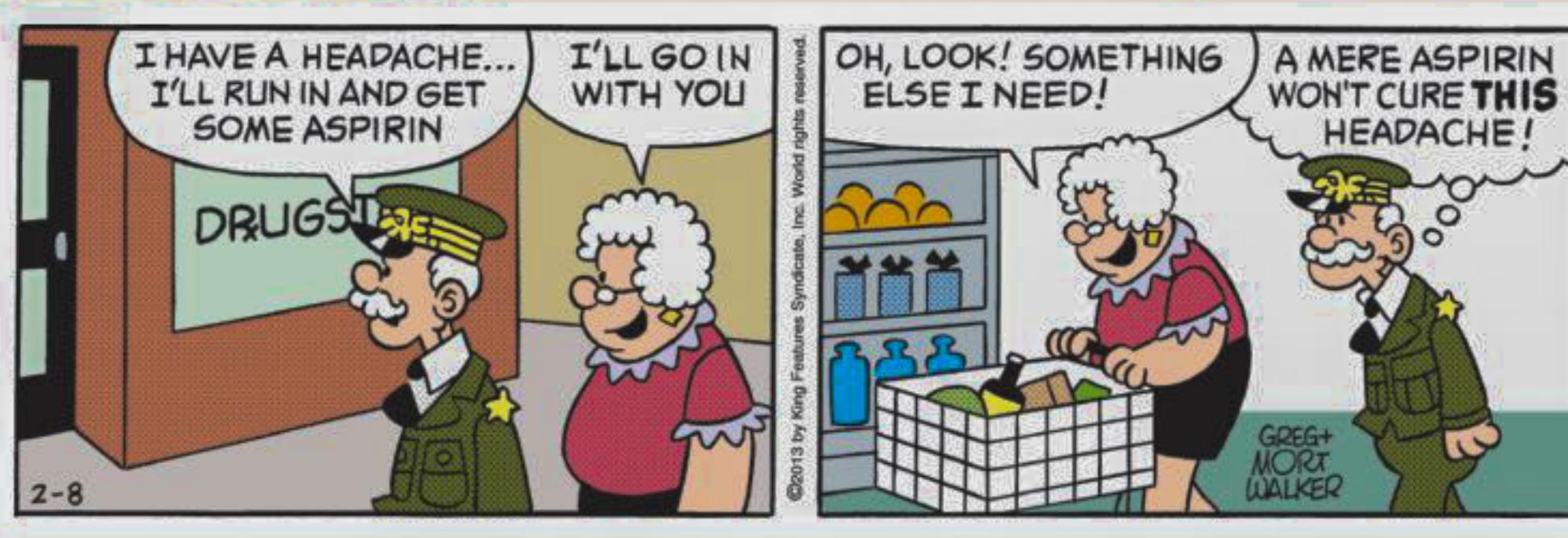
Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
WHEN YOU HAVE ONLY TWO PENNIES LEFT IN THE WORLD, BUY
A LOAF OF BREAD WITH ONE, AND A LILY WITH THE OTHER.
-- CHINESE PROVERB

Yesterday's answer



10-14

BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

HENRY



by Don Trachte

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.

Confucius