

Imperilled trafficked workers

Ensure safe migration

THIS year alone, we have witnessed an alarming increase in trafficking and smuggling of Bangladeshi migrant jobseekers through the Bay of Bengal under false promises of jobs. A recent report by the UNHCR estimates that 53,000 people from Bangladesh and Myanmar have attempted the unsafe sea passage to Malaysia and Thailand this year, during which 540 people died from beatings, starvation or dehydration. As we observed another International Migrants' Day on December 18, it has become more imperative than ever to take concrete steps to address irregular maritime migration flow.

Even though Article 34 of the Overseas Employment and Migration Act, 2013 empowers different authorities, including the local police, elected local representatives and related ministries, to file cases against traffickers, till date no case has been filed under this law. Exemplary punishment must be meted out to fraudulent agents if we are to discourage them from tricking aspiring migrants, an overwhelming majority of whom come from impoverished and vulnerable backgrounds.

We concur with civil society representatives working on migration that the government should create an inter-ministerial and inter-agency committee to prepare and implement an action plan to reduce unsafe passages. In addition, the government, recruiting agents and NGOs need to work together to ensure transparency and accountability of recruiting agencies and migration of skilled labour-power through legal channels.

Currently, many employers actually prefer undocumented workers for low-paying, unskilled and exploitative jobs. Bangladesh and Malaysian governments should re-evaluate the Government to Government (G2G) agreement, so that a larger percentage of migrants can take skilled jobs in the workplace legally.

Consumers pay hefty for LPG

Middlemen reap windfall profit

FOR more than five years now, the government has failed to arrest artificial price mark-up by private companies who deal in liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) used by consumers in the country. It defies understanding how the state-owned Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) sells a cylinder at Tk. 700 while private companies sell the same at Tk. 1,450. Going by what has been reported in this newspaper, we understand that companies and not consumers are getting the benefit of the annual Tk. 75 crore in government subsidies. The purpose of the subsidy was to make LPG more affordable at consumer level but the contrary is happening. Since there has been little by way of market monitoring, the real purpose of subsidy is defeated.

Then again, BPC only produces 20 per cent of the estimated 100,000 tonnes of LPG required annually. The fact remains that with government footing a subsidy bill to the tune of Tk. 500 per 12.5kg cylinder, the gap between the government rate and retail price is approximately Tk. 800. What is even more astonishing is that due to lax controls and oversight, it is alleged that the entire BPC production is bought up by private companies and sold at inflated prices. With BPC lacking necessary market clout and authorities failing to intervene against market malpractices, there is hardly any reason to continue with the subsidy on LPG in its present form. A better way to utilise subsidies would be to pay these directly to target consumers' bank accounts so that they can defray the higher costs of LPG they must pay for.

Some simple questions

FARHANA ISLAM

I am an international student from Bangladesh. My questions are very simple. Why does my mother feel nervous, insecure and upset when I tell her I will go back to Bangladesh? Why does she want me to settle abroad and feel safe and relaxed? I am sure that not only my mother but many other mothers also feel the same way.

If my country is free today then why can't we girls walk freely on roads without anyone staring at us? Why is it that even after working so hard my colleagues are receiving less pay? Why can't they reach their office on time? Why do mothers want to marry their daughters off for their safety, in the fear of them being kidnapped or attacked with acid? When can we get to choose and decide when to get married? I bragged about my country and the Sundarbans to my foreign friends, which made them want to visit my country. But sadly, we failed to protect the world's largest mangrove forest. It is now covered with oil which spilled out when a tanker sank in a river. The oil slick is killing marine and land animals and the trees.

Did we ever wonder why a freedom fighter dies in the hospital untreated? Did we ever wonder why the people who actually contributed for the good of our country never get credit but others post thousands of banners and take the credit? Did we ever wonder why street children have leftover food taken from the roadside? Did we ever wonder why the naive, innocent looking faces with bare feet stare blankly at the ministers when they give speeches, believing each and every promise they make and getting betrayed later? Do we ever see the sadness of the children who don't have a park or a playground to play in? Did we ever wonder what happened to the owner of the building which killed so many people when it collapsed? Did we ever wonder why we keep on complaining about corruption but never dare to make a change?

Do we have the right of a citizen to express our views freely? To vote? To choose a career? To walk home safe? To come back with the feeling that I am returning to my motherland where all the moms will greet their children with open arms rather than sacrifice their happiness for the safety of their children? I want answers to all these questions and a guarantee that I will be unharmed when I return home. Is this too much I am asking as a citizen of Bangladesh?

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The US-Cuba thaw after 50 years: Why now?

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

Publicly, the US stated that the embargo in trade, travel and financial dealings would help to incubate democracy in that authoritarian state.

How much of that has happened? As years passed, the international climate changed. The argument that the embargo would oust Fidel Castro did not work. His illness had forced him to step down in favour of his brother Raul Castro. But then, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, communism was also seen to be no more a threat to the West. The US, in keeping with the times, had also kept up respectable relations with other communist states like China. So the question was raised in the US as to why the US could not now have normal relations with Cuba. But a counter argument was given that the embargoes would impoverish Cuba and help keep it weak. The people of that country were poor and many of them went hungry. Access to medical care and quality education was minimal. So the embargo would now bite more. But the reality was that top Cuban officials were not affected. They continued to live lavishly and went abroad for their medical treatment and schooling. In fact, the embargo was just harming the people and not the Cuban government. Keeping that in mind, it would have been appropriate to lift the embargo.

But in spite of all this, the US government continued to keep the embargoes in place. The reason given was that Cuba had jailed many of its dissidents and there were no multi-party elections in Cuba. There was also no freedom of speech or an independent media. The country had not reimbursed to the US owners the property it had nationalised in the 1950's. Cuba also posed a national security threat to the US, lying only 90 miles off the south east coast of the US.

There were many inside the US who remained uncomfortable with the embargo. So President Obama made an election pledge that he would try to normalise relations with Cuba if he was elected. He felt that for too long the US policy towards Cuba was based on past policy parameters that were irrelevant. President Carter before him also had hoped to ease these restrictions but had failed. There was also too much pressure from the Cubans in exile in the US, who were a powerful electoral factor in any presidential election and were reluctant to ease the embargo.

IT is over 50 years (from October 1960) since the US had imposed a political and economic embargo on Cuba. The reason given then was that the US wanted to ferment Cuban dissent against the communist leader Fidel Castro. It was also said that it was to limit communist influence in the West and to minimise interference from the former Soviet Union, which was the antagonist of the US in the Cold War.

Yet President Obama was determined. So what started out as a proposed prisoner swap between the US and Cuba turned into a 'historic shift in relations between the two countries.' This was all planned during secret meetings in Canada and the Vatican between US and Cuban officials over the past one year. The Pope himself played a significant part in persuading US leaders to change their policy. Finally, it was agreed to re-establish diplomatic relations between the two countries. Both the countries will now open embassies, send ambassadors and increase the flow of people and capital between them. President Obama calls this thaw in relations an end to an 'outdated approach that for decades had failed to advance our interests.'

The question that analysts are asking is why the policy change has come now. Perhaps the thaw was hastened because of two developments. First was the age of the Castro brothers and the other leaders of the revolutionary generation in Cuba. The graying of the Cuban exile population in US was also taken into consideration. This dynamic altered old political balances both inside the Cuban government as well as the US electoral politics. Fidel Castro is now 88 years old and his brother, who is the president, is 83 years old. They are deeply concerned about their succession. The Cuban government calculations have, therefore, changed from the need for more confrontational politics to a more understanding with the US government. The Cuban population in exile in the USA was initially against any liberalisation of US policy towards the communist regime in Cuba. But this group is gradually being replaced by a younger population who find a peaceful deal between Cuba and the US more to their liking. Their stay in the US is more for economic reasons and less for asylum purposes.

The other reason that has pushed the thaw in relations is technology. New inventions in the extraction of shale oil and gas have allowed the US to lower the price of oil worldwide. It definitely has undermined the ability of Venezuela -- a big oil producer and an oil exporter in Latin America -- to continue helping Cuba's bankrupt economy. Cuba now needs an economic alternative, and the US can gradually fit the bill.

It is well known that the US embargo can be lifted only by an act of Congress. But the Republican party will soon be enjoying a majority in both the Senate and in the House, and that party is not in favour of lifting the embargo. President Obama will have to use his executive authority to force the changes he wishes with regard to Cuba. To him the thaw and change in relations with Cuba will be a 'transformative event for the US in Latin America.'

Like Obama, the world is also waiting and hoping for this great transformation. It would welcome the new US-Cuba peaceful relationship.

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Tragedy and conciliation

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDEEP NAYYAR

between the two countries.

Unfortunately, the civil society in India and Pakistan don't feel concerned over their youth nourishing enmity towards each other. They are the best of friends outside the shores of the subcontinent. But, in their own country, they are always in the midst of schemes to hit the other hard without realising that hostilities may become inevitable.

The Pakistanis often say that once the Kashmir problem is solved both sides will live as friends. I have my doubts. Kashmir, according to me, is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is their mistrust in each other. Even by some miracle if the Kashmir issue is solved, some other problem will crop up because of the suspicion.

The Indians and the Pakistanis carry on their enmity in every place they come into contact. It is sad that even cultural events suffer from the same thinking. The *Quwwats* from Pakistan could not sing at the Delhi Press Club, which is supposed to be liberal. On the other hand, India was ridiculed with obscene gestures by the Pakistani players after defeating India in a hockey match.

The visiting Pakistani MPs did not meet the Lok Sabha Speaker, although the Indian MP who arranged the meeting with the Speaker did not check whether she was free at that time. The Indian MPs should have made amends in some other manner but there was no such effort, even for courtesy's sake. Such incidents indicate that even after 70 years of partition, the two countries have not settled down to normal courtesies, much less friendship. The future too does not look bright when enmity seems to be revealing the Hindu identity.

Yesterday it was Sanskrit, the language of Hindu scriptures. Today, it is conversion. The conversion of some Muslims has only downgraded India in the eyes of the world, particularly Pakistan. When the 'converted' say that they were coerced and promised ration card or the BPL card that gives the poor the essentials at a subsidised price, things seem to be murkier than one would imagine.

That fundamentalism is spreading in Pakistan does not surprise me. A state having such blasphemous laws that a liberal Punjab governor could be killed with no action against the murderers is lengthening the shadows. It is unfortunate, but when even the liberal voices are mute because of consequences the fanatics are bound to grow in number and in impudence.

The real point of worry is what is happening to India. The country represents a democratic, secular polity and is respected for this all over the world. Unfortunately,

New Delhi is rapidly become a goalpost of Hindutva, to the disappointment of the world and to the horror of minorities.

What the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat has lamented without any serious challenge, that the Hindu raj has returned to India after 800 years, is bound to question our secular credentials. I am not surprised that the BJP has enrolled four lakh members in Delhi itself. The Congress, which can stall the tide, is too embroiled in dynastic politics. But in the past, the party's ideology of egalitarianism and pluralism was very much in the forefront, whether Jawaharlal Nehru groomed Indira Gandhi and she, in turn, Rajiv Gandhi. But today even Congress President Sonia Gandhi is seen as being right of centre, not even the centre.

India's politics has been too engrossed in personalities. Today, it is Narendra Modi but not what he stands for. Development is too vague to mean direction. India should have taken the initiative to develop the region on the whole. But when ideology is sought to be based on parochialism, it is neither pervasive nor egalitarian in content. The common man feels as much isolated and marginalised as he has been all these years since independence.

The ruling party may have changed at the Centre but the political culture has not. We continue to be feudal in our outlook. This trait transcends other considerations. It does not go well with the democratic temperament. But it is there and has not undergone any perceptible change in the past. Those who come to power become dictators in action. Even when they profess that power is with the people they are using it figuratively and not realistically because they, a very few, serve the country.

Modi has, in the process, buried Nehru's idea of non-alignment deep. True, the movement has lost its raison d'être, the confrontation between the communists and the democratic bloc. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, the communists lost the Cold War. Still, the movement had come to represent an idea that small nations should not fear the big ones because of their size or power. Modi is a product of the capitalist world. He has neither the pull of the Nehru era of socialism, nor that of Mahatma Gandhi's self-sufficiency. Modi wants the country to develop, whatever be the means and how big the economy may create a distance between haves and the have-nots.

Before finishing the article, I must tell something which disappointed me. I mean President Pranab Mukherjee's book. It was indiscreet on his part to release a book on the emergency period. He knows that the office he occupies should not be exposed to political criticism. Still, the president has taken advantage of his position to have the spotlight on the book to justify what he did during the emergency.

President Mukherjee was an integral part of the dictatorial rule at that time. He was the right hand man of Sanjay Gandhi, an extra-constitutional authority who almost took the country to dictatorship. That Mukherjee, supposed to be liberal, went along will always be questioned, however much chest-beating he may do at this time.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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High-risk-prone Rooppur Power Plant

The letter "Heading towards nuclear tragedy" written by Engr. S. A. Mansoor, published in The Daily Star on December 5, 2014 jolted me to the core because from it I learned that the manufacturing work of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant has started in Russia and the news was published in different newspapers on December 3, 2014 which I somehow failed to read.

From the very beginning, conscious citizens and experts were protesting vehemently; I have lost count of how many articles and letters I have read in which the hazards of a nuclear power plant have been explained clearly. I also wrote quite a number of letters urging the government not to go ahead with the plan but it seems all fell on deaf ears.

Now time has come for the people to rise up and compel the government to stop the work of the nuclear power plant because it is predictable that radiation disaster will happen and we will be doomed; destructions will follow us forever.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

A dangerous year for children

This letter is in reference to the article "2014 a devastating year for children: UN" published in The Daily Star on 10.12.2014. We strongly condemn this brutality and atrocities against the children of war ravaged Central African Republic, Iraq, South Sudan, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Ukraine and no adequate words we have to express our grief. All grief is intolerable, unbearable.



PHOTO: AFP

We would like to go far to voice our protest against this violence. Negotiation, as a principal tool used in conflict management has failed. Success looks uncertain; it seems there are none to roll up their sleeves. Children are suffering with no recourse left. They are affected by the war in Syria and Palestine, and are being recruited by the armed groups in the Central African Republic. They are dying from malnutrition, displaced as refugee.

We have no other options but to appeal to the international community, especially the United Nations to come forward to stop violence, and bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. Time is just running out.

Mohiul Islam Polin
Rajbarbag, Dhaka

Indian visa hassle

The letter has reference to the two previous letters published on 8th December and 10th December on Indian visa obstacles. Previously we could fill up Indian visa forms online directly and obtain the e-token. Of late it has become absolutely impossible to file visa applications on self basis.

Of all the countries of the world, online filling of applications for Indian visa has become most difficult, whereas the contrary should have been case. As our nearest neighbour and a dear friend with special relationship we always hope and expect that visa for India tour will be the easiest. The present situation pains as well as baffles us.

Everyday around 1400-1500 persons apply for Indian visa in Gulshan. People are forced to shell out special fees for e-token. If we multiply the number by average tk. 2000 as speed money, the amount becomes quite staggering. The reputation of High Commission of India is being tarnished by the visa hassle problem. Resentment against India among Bangladeshi visa seekers is increasing. IVAC has been appointed by High Commission of India as visa handling agent. So, the onus of solving the relation straining and vexing problem rests with the high commission authorities. We urge the High Commission of India to solve the problem immediately and mitigate the sufferings of the Bangladeshi visa seekers.

Syed Kiyanoosh
One-e-mail

Comments on news report, "Tk 1,849cr Beximco loans rescheduled," published on December 15, 2014

Sayed Rahman

While thousands of small industries are closing down due to the shortage of capital, conglomerates like Beximco are being favoured again and again. It is not a good instance for a healthy economy as well as the banking sector.

Muzaffar Siddique

Do you ever think that this company will ever pay back the tax payers' money? This company is engaged in this game during the last 30 years at least!

"Killing grounds left uncared for" (Dec. 15, 2014)

Sayed Rahman

All the places where massacres occurred should be preserved at any cost.