

Rape—another crime of human traffickers at sea
Myanmar and Malaysia must work together to stop this

AN investigative report by this paper has unraveled the horrifying sexual abuse of Rohingya women while they make their perilous trips at sea. These women travel to Malaysia to join would-be husbands or brothers and fathers who have fled persecution in Myanmar. However, they are subjected to continuous sexual violence throughout the trip by the traffickers and their cohorts who often confine them later, in the slave camps of the destination points where the abuse resumes.

The story of two such women who had been held at a transit camp in Malaysia for more than six months, becoming pregnant as a result of gang rape by the traffickers, shows how easily these criminals have been carrying out their diabolical activities in these slave camps.

Sexual violence is the latest human rights abuse on the long list of abuses by these trafficking rings which have the complicity of officials of the destination points that allows them to carry on their nefarious activities without getting caught. The physical and psychological trauma these women face are unimaginable. The international community, especially Myanmar, from where these victims are fleeing, and Malaysia, the destination point, must come forward to find ways to rescue these helpless women and catch these criminals who are guilty of kidnapping, torture, killing and now rape.

Again, all this just points to the reality that Myanmar must put a stop to the persecution of Rohingya Muslims and give them the citizenship they rightfully deserve. That would significantly reduce the number of Rohingyas, including many women, fleeing their homeland and risking their lives in the process.



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

TWICE in a row two foreign ministers of this country have made the same mistake, each time on the day before the visit of an Indian prime minister. In September 2011, our foreign minister had insisted that the Teesta water sharing agreement was going to be signed during Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka, although the same day the Indian foreign secretary said otherwise in Delhi. In June 2015, another foreign minister told the press that there was no chance Narendra Modi was going to meet BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. He was proven wrong later in the day, again in Delhi, when the Indian foreign secretary specified the exact date and time of the upcoming meeting between the two leaders.

While the gravities of the two goof-ups are not the same, both can be described in soccer parlance as offside. Instead of players going before balls, mouths in both instances went before facts. It isn't clear what causes such a disjunct distribution in diplomatic deployment of information between the foreign ministries of the two neighbouring countries.

A high-level visit involves strenuous preparations until both sides are ready to read from the same hymn sheet. The devil is always in the details, and minor slip-ups are possible while cranking out the busy itinerary for the head of a government. This is also why the work is supposed to start months ahead of time. Last minute adjustments can happen, because new developments push new priorities.

But why is it that our foreign ministers have been caught on the wrong foot both the times? Is it because they tend to unilaterally railroad through bilateral issues? Or is it because the Indians always keep their

cards close to their chest, hanging their Bangladesh counterparts out to dry?

Either way, twice it left our foreign ministers holding the bag. And it also left many of us scratching our heads as to why such inconsistencies must crop up again and again in a standardised process. Former US first lady Eleanor Roosevelt said that if people betray you once it's their fault, but if they betray you twice it is your fault. That's not to say that the Indians have betrayed us, but that we have manifestly suckered ourselves.

It's customary amongst television newscasters to say

Strong nations are strong because they are tough on soft issues. On May 28, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe apologised in the Diet for his rude outburst.

sorry if they mispronounce a word or inadvertently misread the script. While we are yet to hear an apology from our former foreign minister almost four years after she had misinformed this nation, the incumbent's indiscretion is still fresh from the oven. We don't know if he contemplates regret or is even stung by any compunction for telling an untruth to his countrymen!

But he should know that irrespective of what he does, it has dented his credibility as the front man of our foreign relations. And if he doesn't clarify his position, it will only continue to haunt him for the rest of his tenure and encroach upon his reputation with a vengeance. In some other country, he would have been

asked to leave his job in disgrace. Unfortunately, that isn't a foregone conclusion in our case.

Strong nations are strong because they are tough on soft issues. On May 28, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe apologised in the Diet for his rude outburst. He had barked at an opposition lawmaker during her question about controversial defence legislation for which he faced criticism from both ruling and opposition parties. Former US president Bill Clinton had offered his apology to the American people for his sexual misconduct. David Cameron met Nelson Mandela in 2006 and said it was wrong of Margaret Thatcher to brand him as a terrorist.

In other words, all mistakes seek closure in modest explanations, more so in honest apologies. Our foreign minister should investigate how the erroneous information landed on his desk and then share his findings with us. He should also understand where the gap lies between our conclusion and Indian confirmation. Maybe, next time we should wait until that gap is bridged or think of issuing joint communiqués or simultaneous briefings to avoid surprises.

The purpose here isn't to turn a mole into a mountain. But it's embarrassing and disappointing to find that there are occasional slips between the cup and our official lips. The minister should ask himself why it doesn't happen on the Indian side. Professionalism has its own dignity not to be negotiated for parochial gains.

The picture of Khaleda Zia shaking hands with Narendra Modi has been a graphic reminder of that quiet risk. It's possible the minister either lied to us or spoke before having a complete grasp on the fact. Either way it defeated the basic tenets of diplomacy, because the talent that should have been used to win negotiations abroad was sadly wasted at home.

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Child Labour Day
New child labour census needed

UNDERAGE children working in developing countries has been a harsh reality for many years and Bangladesh is no exception. Children work for unacceptably long hours, sometimes in harmful conditions and are deprived of their basic right to education. There are children in glass factories, in welding shops, garbage collection points, ship breaking yards, tanneries, and so on. A large number of children work in households as domestic help with little or no pay or free time. Yet, Bangladesh has no updated data about the number of children working, especially those occupied in hazardous jobs or the sectors in which they work.

For any effective measure to bear fruit, it has now become a necessity for the government to conduct a new national survey as the last census was conducted in 2003. More than a decade has passed and the country has undergone major development, particularly in industry, over this period. Given that the government intends to eliminate hazardous child labour by 2016, the need for a new census has become that much more important.

We have some data collected by various development organisations, both national and international. However, without a census, we will never know the extent to which underage children are engaged and in many cases, exploited in various formal and informal sectors.

Laws are there but enforcement is sorely missing. In the absence of enforcement of law, children are unduly exposed to hazards at work and with little vigilance by law enforcement agencies, many face torture and abuse. We suggest that a designated child labour body be formed to redress child rights abuses.



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

THE SOUND & THE FURY

I never knew Kalpana *di* – not personally anyway -- the fearless indigenous activist who was snatched away from us by "mysterious" powers-that-be 19 years ago, when she was only 20 years of age. I've only known her through the breathing words of her diary, published as a book by the Hill Women's Federation and subsequently banned by the government; I've known her through those words that the state deemed too dangerous, through those nuanced critiques of patriarchy, ethnocentric nationalism and militarism, through her insistence that the struggle for liberation from Bangali oppression should not subsume the struggle for freedom of indigenous women from the dual oppression of patriarchy and ethno-centrism. I've known her through her brother, Kalindi Kumar Chakma, who -- still haunted by the last words of her sister, "Dada, mahre bacha!" (Brother, save me!) -- has waged a relentless fight for the last 19 years in the pursuit of justice for his sister, despite repeated threats and harassments from powerful quarters. I have known her from her comrades -- both *adivasi* and Bangali -- who keep her memory alive, through their protests, writings and exhibitions, and through their own work against the systematic oppression of *adivasis* in the CHT.

But I've also known her through -- or despite -- the careful manoeuvres to discredit her memory and deny her abduction. I've known her through the farcical show staged by the powers-that-be for the last 19 years in the name of justice, a charade that has made a mockery of the rule of law, and highlighted the ways in which the law can be made subservient to the interests of the powerful. I've known her through the deliberate attempts by the state, during numerous investigations, to erase the eyewitness accounts of her brother which claimed that a group of 12 army and Village Defense Party (VDP) men -- including Lieutenant Ferdous, Saleh Ahmed and Nurul Haq (as named in the first FIR) -- picked up Kalpana from their house. I've known her through the questionable report submitted by the Commission formed to investigate her abduction. A report which, kept hidden for fourteen long years of her disappearance, when finally published, insisted that she had been "willingly or unwillingly abducted." Because, apparently, *willing abduction* isn't an oxymoron.

The police reports, one submitted in 2010 and another in 2012, also made similar claims; they not only discounted the eye-witnesses and testimonies of indigenous villagers, but did not even question, let

alone arrest, the main accused in the FIR. Kalindi rejected both the reports, and his lawyers pleaded for a judicial inquiry, stating that another police investigation was very unlikely to lead to a fair investigation. Not surprisingly, that request was turned down and another police investigation was ordered, with specific directives that the three named in the FIR be interrogated and their testimonies recorded.

Those of us who were at the hearing in Rangamati -- did we really think that justice would finally be served through this new investigation, that the police would have the power to challenge the all-powerful institution that is given all but absolute impunity by the state?

Maybe the optimists amidst us still held hope, even after this long delay, in the rule of law, in justice, in the

case, to no avail. It's perhaps high time to conclude that no investigation conducted by the police would lead to an acceptable and fair outcome. If the state itself does not want the case to be resolved and the perpetrator(s) arrested, how can we expect an investigation officer, no matter how valiant and honest, to be able to do so?

19 years later, it's not only justice for Kalpana which remains outside of the reach of the *adivasis*. The promises made in the Accord, too, remain unfulfilled 19 years on, with incidents of exploitation of *adivasis*, violence against *adivasi* women, land grabbing by settlers and state institutions and curbing of dissent taking a more ominous turn with each passing year. Bangali settlers and law enforcement officers stationed there continue to enjoy impunity for crimes committed against *adivasi* communities. Dissent by indigenous groups is met with

For the Kalpana Chakma I know and the one I never will



Photographs of Kalpana hang on the wall of her home.

state's assurance that all lives are equally valuable. But, alas, the farce continued, as the date for submitting the report got postponed 22 times! A progress report, submitted to a Rangamati court last year, reads, "Since the key witness of the case is the victim herself... the investigation of the case cannot be completed until she is found." Through this claim, the state is essentially setting a dangerous precedent that cases of enforced disappearances cannot be resolved until and unless the victim is found! And why is Kalpana the only key witness to a case that had two eye-witnesses, her two brothers? The investigator in charge of the case did not even take the testimony of Lalbihari Chakma, who, too, had been dragged out of the house, along with Kalpana.

So far 35 investigation officers have investigated the

violence from different quarters. What would Kalpana have said, or thought, I wonder often, if she had lived to see the continued oppression of her people, even after "peace" has been established in the region?

I've only known Kalpana *di* in snippets, from conversations and debates, tears and struggles, state propaganda and alter-narratives. In all likelihood, I'll never really get to know her beyond these imaginings. But for as long as we are alive, a part of her will live with us who dream of a more egalitarian and democratic society, and with every indigenous activist who continues to fight for the freedom of the *adivasis*.

The writer is a journalist and activist.

COMMENTS

- "Democracy begins within party"**
 (June 9, 2015)
- ▼
- Fazlul Bari**
 Politicians in Bangladesh face 'familycracy' within their party. Until and unless they themselves are truly willing to democratise the parties, they will remain in the hands of the family members of their leaders.
- ▼
- SM**
 There is no democracy within both AL and BNP.
- ▼
- Shah Alam**
 Democracy should be exercised within the political parties first and foreigners should be kept outside of our internal affairs.
- ▼
- Paul Tapan Kumar**
 Khaleda Zia's own party is itself the mirror of what type of democracy she is advocating.
- ▼
- Ahmed Farhad Salim**
 The attitude of servitude is a disturbing trait of our politicians.

- "150 return home today"**
 (June 8, 2015)
- ▼
- Nirmal Kumar Sarker**
 The government should create opportunities for people who go to foreign countries for seeking jobs.
- "Exchange of enclaves starts from July 31" (June 9, 2015)**
- ▼
- Sadman Bin Ornat**
 It will be a gala moment for the inhabitants of enclaves. Credit goes to both countries' prime ministers. It's a perfect example of how two different countries, despite colossal bilateral discontent, can act smartly. Pakistan should learn from it since they have worsened the Kashmir issue.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
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Modi's Bangla pivot

Taking a cue from Obama's Asia pivot, Modi has launched his own brand of outreach to neighbours. Sri Lanka was his major diplomatic success in terms of nudging out China from his backyard. Nepal and Bangladesh naturally fall in the equation. But China's loss of Sri Lanka was compensated by Pakistan with the Karachi port thrown open to its maritime ambition in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan's deflated value to its all weather friend was thus appreciated ten fold. Not good news for India. India followed through and won over Nepali quake victims with unprecedented solidarity and help. Modi could not afford to keep his neighbours unclaimed for and send them in the arms of others in default.

Prior to Modi's recent trip, China published a truncated Indian map in which Arunachal and Kashmir were not shown by his host. Beijing is also denying regular visas to visitors from these two states! Modi is aware that NEFA cannot be defended without the cooperation of Bangladesh. This is why the connectivity rhetoric is on full blast. A combination of factors had contributed to Modi's galloping full tilt to the long neglected LBA issue. Regarding the Teesta deal India needs more time to watch and wait on how Bangladesh reacts to China's possible counter pivoting and how we are able to play the China card. No nation will forego its interests.

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Very little left for us to give

The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam's commentary entitled "Modi, hopefully, is no Manmohan" published on June 8, truly says that there is very little left for us to give to India. Now it is India's responsibility to give in return for our heartfelt gestures. We firmly hope that promises made by Mr. Modi are not mere promises; we expect fruitful outcomes.

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