

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Towards justice for victims of Tazreen Garments fire

A long awaited step taken

IT is with relief that we receive the news of a Dhaka Court framing charges against 13 people in the Tazreen Garments Fire case that killed 112 workers on November 14, 2012. Though it took almost three years, that those indicted include two of the owners of the factory, gives us hope that justice will be served to those unfortunate workers who perished in that fire. It also sends a strong message to other factory owners that they cannot avoid their responsibility to ensure safety for all their workers.

All too often we witness employers using their money and influence to go scot free for crimes against poor, helpless workers. In this case the court found the accused guilty of murder, culpable homicide and causing death by negligence. The factory was built on a faulty work plan and the walkway was turned into a warehouse. It did not have any fire exit. When the fire broke out the workers were asked not to leave the premises by the managers and security guards who said it wasn't serious. These were the primary factors that led to so many deaths. It was a tragedy caused by gross negligence and total disregard for human lives.

The court's role in charging these individuals who had little concern for the safety of the workers, is certainly commendable. We hope the remaining five accused who are absconding will be arrested soon. An expeditious trial, moreover, will serve as a precedent for all other such cases and may help to save lives in the future.

Rakhines driven off their country

Protect their land and lives

REPORTEDLY, the Rakhine community in Bangladesh has been forced out of their homes over successive years, as a result of systematic oppression and land grabbing by influential quarters. The situation is so dire, notes a citizens group, that their number has gone down from one lakh to only 2,500 over several decades. In Barguna and Patuakhali, for instance, where the situation is the worst in the country, there were 144 and 93 Rakhine paras respectively in 1948. However, there are only 26 and 13 paras left in these areas, highlighting the appalling extent to which forced evictions have taken place. Land grabbers have not even spared their places of worship – while there were 19 Buddhist temples in the area, there is now only one left.

Grabbing of minority land in Bangladesh has become a common practice. The land encroachers, usually people in positions of power within a particular area, either evict the Rakhines from their homes through violent means, or create such a hostile situation through threats and intimidation that they are compelled to leave, fearing for their lives. Rather than give protection to the minority communities, the law enforcers and local administration often turn a blind eye towards the violence and violations perpetrated by land grabbers, creating a culture of impunity that triggers further encroachments.

We urge the government to take serious note of the matter and ensure adequate protection to the land and lives of the Rakhines, who are as much citizens of Bangladesh as the rest of us.

COMMENTS

"Dhaka Deluged"
(September 2, 2015)

Sajid Rashid
DCC, RAJUK and WASA must be rewarded for this situation!

"Should our professors 'hang' themselves?"
(September 1, 2015)

M Abdul Jabbar
It's the consequence of dirty politics practiced by teachers.

Salahuddin Jamal
We must unite to protest and resist these unruly elements in the Chhatra League.

Reaz AU
Student politics has become really dirty and should be banned.

Mirza Abdul Khaleque
We urge the prime minister to do something to control Chhatra League and Jubo League to save Awami League.

"BNP turns 38 and looks aimless"
(September 1, 2015)

Reaz AU
BNP should acknowledge its strength. They should also ask for the forgiveness of people for its past action and start anew without Jamaat.

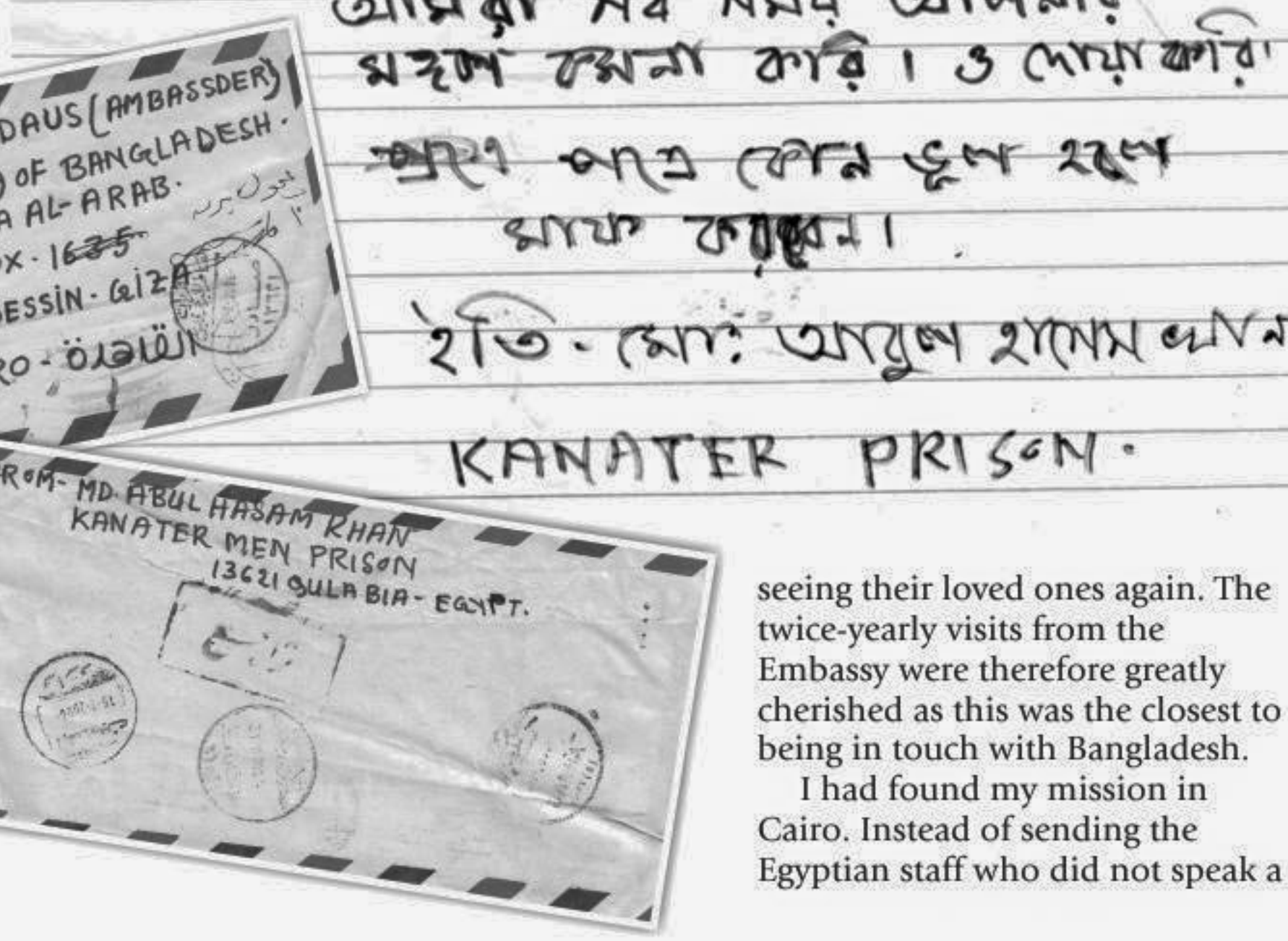
Letter from QANATAR

NASIM FIRDAUS

WHEN I received my marching orders for Egypt, I knew it was meant to be a punishment posting. Based on unsubstantiated allegations of supporting her opponent, the then Prime Minister had decided my fate; I was to go to oblivion. To me, a posting to Egypt was a gift. I had long cherished the desire to see the country of the pharaohs, walk the streets of old Cairo, browse around Khane Khalili bazaar, sip coffee in the coffee shops frequented by the great Egyptian Nobel laureate Nagib Mahfouz and visit the famed Al Azhar University where my uncle studied in the 1930s. But my mission to Egypt became much more challenging and meaningful when browsing through old files in the process of cleaning up. I found an English translation of a letter written in Arabic by my Egyptian staff seeking permission to visit two Bangladeshi prisoners long interned at the Qanatar prison. I was told that an Egyptian staff member visited these two prisoners twice a year to verify if they were still serving their life term for smuggling drugs into Egypt, an offence for which there is no mercy. While visiting, he would buy some local food for the prisoners and check on their welfare. The two Bangladeshis, one a cook and the other a sailor, were working on a foreign vessel when the Suez Canal police inspected it. The police claimed to find drugs in their luggage. Both denied the charges but under Egyptian law and the language barrier, there was no respite for them. By the time I presented my credentials to

President Hosni Mubarak in 2006, the two Bangladeshis had served nearly 18 years behind bars. Egyptian prisons are in the middle of deserts, far away from civilisation. Prisoners serving life terms had little hope of returning home and

আমার। সব শুনে আমার জাফার ও
দায় নিবনা।
আমার জি. মোসাদ্দ রহমান তৈলই
আমার।
আমার যে হাচ্ আর তাত ও কুসরা
কিছু পাঠিয়ে দিলেন।
আমরা দুই জন পেট ভেঙে এক বোনা
আইনগি।
মেসায়. এক বছর সব আমরা দেশীয়
আমরা আইনগি। আমায় সব
আমায় সব দরকারে দোয়া করগি।
আমায় যে সব মজা দুখে মারা
কালেন।
যদি আমায় আমায় সব কিছু মজা
করগেন।



seeing their loved ones again. The twice-yearly visits from the Embassy were therefore greatly cherished as this was the closest to being in touch with Bangladesh. I had found my mission in Cairo. Instead of sending the Egyptian staff who did not speak a

word of Bangla, I sent my First Secretary to visit the prisoners. Apparently, this was the first time that a Bangladeshi had visited them at Qanatar. He took with him home cooked food prepared by our excellent cook Ramiz. Soon thereafter, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a letter dated July 7, 2006 from the Qanatar prison which read "Madam, Please accept my salaam and doa. Hope by the grace of God you are keeping well. With the fish, rice and chicken roast that you sent the two of us had one huge meal that filled our stomach. Madam, after 18 years we ate deshi food. After our meal we prayed to Allah so that he may keep you happy and peaceful at all times. If you can, please help us. We wish you well and we are always praying for you..... Sincerely, Md. Abul Hashem Khan, Kanatar Prison".

I needed to get them freed. While petitioning for pardon with the high and mighty in the Egyptian government of Hosni Mubarak, I was repeatedly reminded that the presidential pardon was not applicable to drug smugglers. From Embassy staff to friends in the diplomatic community who had sailors languishing in Egyptian prisons on similar charges, everyone warned me that it was an impossible mission. I refused to accept that argument and tried to get their names on the yearly presidential pardon list, until it was time for me to leave Egypt.

As I was about to leave the country, the president's Chief of Staff Mr. Suleiman Awad called to say adieu and let me know that there was hope that my prisoners could be considered for pardon soon. In November 2007, I returned to Dhaka with great sadness as the prisoners could not return home despite my best efforts. Next year, in January 2008 Counsellor Shahidul Karim informed me from Egypt that the two Bangladeshis were pardoned and released.

The cook having received his freedom from prison was imprisoned by his heart. On receiving news of his pardon, Hashem died of a massive heart attack and was later buried in Egypt. His shipmate came back to his family after living under the sands of an Egyptian desert for more than 18 years.

The letter from Qanatar remains my priceless memento from Egypt. The writer is a former ambassador.

A misguided election campaign

"Vote for me not the military" may win the election but endangers future co-operation

LARRY JAGAN

CAMPAIGNING in the forthcoming elections is set to get underway in days, although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi already appears to have hit the campaign trail. And all indications are that it is going to be a very bitter battle. More importantly the tone set during this period in the lead up to the polls on November 8 will affect what happens afterwards – no matter what the actual results are.

The National League for Democracy's campaign slogan "Time for Change" certainly captures the prevailing mood all across the country. And then – given the crisis within the party over the candidate selection process – the message to the electorate is do not consider who the constituency candidate is, but vote for the peacock flag and its leader.

"Our motto is a vote for the NLD, is a vote for Aung San Suu Kyi," said Win Htein – currently an MP and very close to the NLD leader. He told me that he is originally from the Insein area in Yangon, whereas he stood for the by-election in 2012 for Meitika where no one knew him.

"Who are you they said," he told me recently. "So I said, do you know Daw Aung San Suu Kyi? Do you love her? Then vote for me, I work for her!" He had an overwhelming victory as a result.

This approach will certainly bring people to the polls to vote for her. But will it be enough for the landslide victory Aung San Suu Kyi expects? She has been confidently telling diplomats that the NLD will win some eighty percent of the seats that are up for election – that would give her party some 60% of the total since 25% of the

parliamentary seats are reserved for soldiers nominated by the commander-in-chief.

The NLD has also alienated the country's Muslim population – around an estimated 4% of the country – by banning the selection of Muslim candidates, even in Muslim areas. This has meant some high profile candidates were turned down. The order came from the party's top leaders.

Fear of angering the Buddhist nationalists – especially the Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion, which is better known by its Myanmar-language acronym Ma Ba Tha, which includes the outspoken monk Ashin Wirathu – convinced the party's leaders to exclude Muslims from their constituency list. "It wasn't easy and involved a lot of soul searching," said a member of the party's central executive, who declined to be identified.

As a result of the elections, the most likely outcome will be a hung parliament – with the NLD the largest party but without an absolute majority. This means she will have to count on the other smaller parties and the ethnic groups in parliament to put her in the driving seat – to elect the president, form the government and push for constitutional change.

But more worrying for the post-election period is the Lady's concerted effort to make this a two-way fight – between democrats and the military. She has repeated this mantra several times over the last few weeks, notably after the proposed constitutional changes were effectively vetoed by the military MPs in parliament. It will gain her popularity and votes for sure. But it may handicap her in the longer run –

after the election.

During the combined campaign to change the constitution last year with the 88 Group, they warned her not to antagonise the army and to resist confronting them head on. She ignored their advice and angered the military leaders, especially Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. As a result he cancelled a planned meeting with her in June – which she had been seeking for nearly two years. Keeping communications channels open with the army is essential.

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This is critical as the army is going to be the "king makers" in Myanmar's future political landscape after the elections. Already former senior military officers, turned academics and analysts, are looking at post-poll scenarios – on how to ensure the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi are not in the driving seat. While the top military brass went talk to the Lady at the

moment – directly or indirectly – they would have no trouble negotiating with her after the election results are known, said a former military officer on condition of anonymity.

That is one of the reasons the speaker and acting chairman of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Thura Shwe Mann had to be sidelined now, because of the fear that his close relationship with the Lady would hamper their continued hold on power. As a former senior general in the army before the 2010 elections, Shwe Mann is viewed by the military hierarchy as a traitor.

While Daw Suu must be taken into account in any post-election negotiations – especially if she gains a significant proportion of seats – much rests on her actions and attitude towards the army. A more conciliatory approach to the army would not lessen her electoral popularity, but would give her a stronger hand in the fraught post-election dialogue that will follow the results.

The danger is that if she exceeds expectations and wins a majority in parliament – or close to it – the elite may be forced to take the "coup" option and follow the Thai model of democracy. Although Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has publicly declared that the army would respect the election results, other important leaders in government have told visiting diplomats that a "constitutional coup" could not be ruled out if things did not go their way. The more belligerent the Lady is towards the army, the more likely this is the scenario that will be adopted.

The writer is a specialist on Myanmar and a former BBC World Service News Editor for the Asia region.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Bootstrapping SME business

Nowadays, SMEs hold a huge portion of total businesses in Bangladesh and it has been playing a great role in creating entrepreneurs. Large businesses need huge amounts of capital and a professional touch in management to sustain themselves; on the contrary, SME formation and operation is much easier. That is not the only reason why SME businesses are spreading here in Bangladesh. While export industries of Bangladesh are mostly in possession of large corporations, SMEs are mostly niche and need-based businesses, concerned to meet the local customers' demand. But this orientation of large corporations and SMEs in

Bangladesh is changing in the globalised world as every business, regardless of its size, wants to reach out to the maximum number of customers and retain maximum revenue from the market. From this scenario the question arises: how could SMEs sustain and compete along with the large corporations? IP and geographical indication rights protection is going to be crucial for the competitiveness of SMEs against large corporation in countries like Bangladesh. It is up to the government to take the right step, not only for growing SMEs in number, but also to support them to sustain in the business.
Md. Muslim Reza
Azimpur, Dhaka

Salinity in coastal areas

By diverting the natural flow of rivers, our neighbouring country India has managed to stop the encroachment of salinity from sea waters. Farmers in our country may greatly benefit from this method. The government and many NGOs are working on it and other rural development partners should help farmers in this regard.
Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka