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EDITORIAL



FOUNDER EDITOR LATE S. M. ALI

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Violence against children

Stop its unbridled rise

TE fully endorse the anxiety expressed by a local human rights organisation at the increasing incidence of violence against children. The latest incident of the kind is the shooting and killing of a young boy of sixteen, allegedly by the owner of the restaurant he was working in. And the poor boy's fault was that he had asked for a raise which had infuriated the owner who, as easy as anything, shot the boy dead and tried to pass it off as a case of mugging.

Several such acts of violence have been reported in the media since the bestial treatment of Rajon. The alleged killer in this case have been flaunting his influence on the law enforcing agencies in carrying himself in such an abrasive manner and meting out rough treatment to his employees.

This is a sad picture that mirrors, unfortunately, a malaise which the state and the society have not been able to cure as yet. And the ever increasing incidences of violence against children in all spheres have been in good part due to the lack of prompt legal action and punishment of the perpetrators. However, we are happy to note that the trial of Rajon's killers has been concluded in good time and the verdict will be announced on November 8.

While there is need for awareness for all concerned, unless exemplary punishment is awarded, children will continue to be victims of inhumane behaviour. Perhaps a time has come to revisit the provisions of the act related to the prevention of violence against women and children and incorporate measures to prevent the recurrence of such acts.

'NGO' cheats rural women

Where is the monitoring mechanism?

TE are amazed at the report of "NGO officials" at a remote village in Sadurapul upazila in Kishoreganj embezzling about Tk 37 lakh from poor rural women in the name of capacity-building and income-generation. The officials, who disappeared overnight with the money, were from a fake NGO called 'Hosto Shilpa Private Ltd' set up six months ago. Reportedly, the NGO employed women from the area as field officers to recruit rural women as members for training on sewing and arts and crafts. From these members, the NGO charged admission fee, training fee and security money for electricity-run sewing machines. But on Tuesday, the five officials entrusted with the money fled the village with the women's meagre savings, and their dreams of a better life.

It is deplorable that unscrupulous people would prey on poor women in the villages. That they should do this in the name of training and empowering these women, by exploiting people's faith in NGOs, is even more disgraceful. The Kishoreganj UNO informed the victims that the NGO did not have any registration with the social welfare department and that there was no record of it at his office. The question is why has this fact come to light now and

not before?

This highlights the importance of monitoring NGOs and of ensuring that they do not carry out dishonest activities victimising unsuspecting people. With NGOs working all over the country, particularly in remote villages, the social welfare department and local government must remain alert to the possibility of dishonest persons setting up fake NGOs, exploiting people's confidence in non-government development activities. The perpetrators of this crime must be brought to book without delay.

COMMENTS

"Not a good place for the sick" (October 28, 2015)

Alamgir Mahmud

Isn't there anyone to look after this place?

Abira Is the authority blind?

Latifa Banu

How unfortunate the poor people in our country are!

"River transit fees to be fixed next month" (October 28, 2015)

Petros Mendes

US \$ 4.9 per weight ton or freight ton? It should be charged per freight ton if Bangladesh intends to benefit from it.

"Foreign diplomats shouldn't overreact" (October 28, 2015)

Shufi A Bhuiyan

They seem to have forgotten that Bangladeshis are occasionally killed in South Africa, USA and the Middle East and we do not overact this

Anonymous Their citizens got killed, so they have every reason to overreact.

WAR CRIMES TRIALS

And now the Amnesty International

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

ND now the Amnesty International (AI), the watchdog body for world-wide human rights has come up with a statement on its website under the title Bangladesh: Two opposition leaders face imminent execution after serious flaws in their trials and appeals, on October 27m 2015. According to AI, "in 2013, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed and Salauddin Quader Chowdhury were sentenced to death by the country's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) on charges of war crimes and genocide at trials that failed to meet international standards for fair trial. Both men had their convictions and sentences upheld on appeal in June and July this year respectively". This time around, the human rights body went further by asserting that, "serious crimes were also committed by the pro-independence forces, but no one has been investigated or brought to justice for them".

In the past, a number of organisations expressed their concerns in general about the trial process, but none of them went as far suggesting, as AI did, that the "proindependence forces" should also be brought to justice. This is equivalent to suggesting that it was not only the Nazis, but also the members of allied forces in World War II which should have been brought to justice.

Reading through my multiple contributions in TDS since the inception of the trails, AI researcher Abbas Faiz contacted me multiple times over the years, asking for clarifications on many aspects of the trials and, in some cases, asking for a few documents, which were duly supplied to him. Yet, "their trial and appeals process were clearly flawed and since they now face the death penalty the ultimate miscarriage of justice may be only days away," said David Griffiths, Al's South Asia Research Director. "The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and can never be a way to deliver justice," said Abbas Faiz, AI's Bangladesh researcher. The AI researcher must recognise that it is the victims in particular, and the people of Bangladesh in general, who possess the unimpeded right to decide what form of punishment would "deliver justice", as long as it is done under the law enacted by the lawmakers of this sovereign country.

In fact, AI's attributions of them as

'opposition politicians' reflect its absolute ignorance of Bangladesh's history of birth or the misinformation fed by some quarters. What could be more ignorant than when AI opined that the trials have "targeted opposition leaders"? What could be a more ludicrous observation? It was primarily Jamaat-e-Islami, and to a lesser extent Muslim League, the political opponents of AL, that collaborated with the occupation forces and worked against our Liberation War. The two convicts were members of those abovementioned political parties. So how could one surmise that the convicts are linked to political opponents? One would be surprised to note that the AI has termed Jamaat's anarchistic reaction to every verdict as a "peaceful demonstration" and asked security forces to ensure people's right to demonstrate peacefully.

It would be in order to look back at two particular condemned war criminals for whom the AI has come up with the recent statement. Albeit, not for the purpose of comparison; it could be stated that the final death penalty verdict of Salauddin Quader Chowdhury could very well be qualified as the most 'popular' one among all such verdicts pronounced so far. The convict, better known for his

antics, vulgarism and unprecedented notoriety, has never expressed remorse for his nationally-known crimes. Legal procedures seemed like they were nothing to him, so he violated the court decorum willfully and laughed at the judges and lawyers. Attempts to prove at this stage that he was not in Bangladesh during the nine months of genocide through some alibi witnesses from Pakistan, is equivalent to attempting to prove a hypothesis that the sun does not really rise in the East.

I wrote a piece in TDS (March 5, 2004) about the second convict; an excerpt of it was as follows: "I had a classmate in my hometown college; both of us were activists of the same student party and together got elected to the students' union. Over the years, he changed his political belief and in 1971, we were on the opposite sides of the history. As a leader of the infamous Badar-Bahini, he was instrumental in torturing and killing our people, while I was baiting my life to save them. Currently, he is a very powerful cabinet minister of the alliance government". However, no matter what Mojaheed had been rewarded with in independent Bangladesh, his classmates did not forget or forgive his felonious past and barred him from joining the reunion of the Class of '66 of that college that took place when Mujaheed was a cabinet minister and flew the hard-earned green-red flag of my country, whose creation he opposed tooth and nail.

From the inception of the trials, the odds have been high. It was a daunting task for the prosecutors to collect evidences and witnesses for the horrendous crimes that were committed some 42 years ago. During the greater part of that period, the parties and people who were in state power were neither in favour of the trials nor contemplated that the trials would ever take place. In many cases, the documentary evidences pertaining to the crimes were systematically destroyed. Also many of the direct witnesses of the crimes that happened 44 years ago have passed away. In the face of the killings of several witnesses by the supporters of the convicts, it was risky for the witnesses to come forward to testify.

In my limited research, I have not come across any war crimes tribunal whose proceedings are as transparent and where the defendants are given VIP treatment. Also in accordance with international standards, trials are open to all. At the same time, the accused are given adequate time and facilities to prepare their cases. Prosecutors must furnish them with a list of witnesses, along with the copies of recorded statements and documents upon which they intend to rely. Defendants also have an unfettered right to call witnesses and cross-examine prosecution witnesses. All of this is in keeping with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The US Ambassador-at-large for War Crimes, Stephen Rapp, who visited Bangladesh a number of times over the past years to monitor the trial process, has emphatically lauded all attributes of the trial process in his last visit to Dhaka in August last year. In his words, "the best way in the world to find the truth is the judicial process where the evidence is presented, where witnesses are cross-examined, where both sides have an opportunity to be heard and that is what is being done here [Bangladesh]. It is the process that the American government strongly supports," he affirmed.

Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in

Boys will not be Boys



AMIN

old Kabita Das, a class-X student of Bijoy Sarani

N October 13, 15-year-

High School, was stabbed to death when she came out of school on a lunch break. Her killer, Bikram Chandra Sarker, was a university student who had been stalking her for quite a while. Kabita had rejected his romantic overtures and hence paid the price - with her life. Her father had complained to

a public official but no one had listened. It was only after she was brutally murdered that Bikram was caught and handed over to the police.

Stalking, despite a law prohibiting it, is a nightmare most young girls and women must bear on a daily basis. Local thugs hanging around near corners, outside school, taunt girls on the streets, make lewd comments and indecent proposals. Sometimes lust hides under the pretext of 'love'. Refusal to reciprocate can lead to frightening consequences. Jolly Akhter, 18, an undergraduate student of Mongalbari Degree College of Jopurhat, had been stalked by Abu Sayem, a married man from her village. When Jolly directly rejected his proposal, Abu threatened to kidnap her and later followed her to her grandmother's house where her parents thought she would be safe. Abu, with his accomplices, ripped open the tin roof of the house where Jolly was sleeping, poured petrol on her and set her on fire - she had 20 percent burns on her face and hands.

Often those who try to stand up for the victims have to pay a heavy price. Chanpa Rani, the mother of four daughters and an employee of Faridpur Sugar Mill, was killed by Devashish Saha Rony, a stalker who ran her over with his motorbike. Chanpa Rani had called him and told him to stop harassing her two daughters. Four years later, Rony was sentenced to death for the murder, though the police could not arrest him as he had absconded.

It took decades for human rights activists and hundreds of tragic incidents, including innumerable suicides by the victims, to convince the state that such stalking should be treated as a crime and therefore punishable. The court in 2011 declared stalking of girls and women illegal, asking the government to treat it as sexual harassment. For the first time, the chauvinistic term 'eve teasing', that effectively diffused the gravity of the offence, was to be replaced with the more appropriate word 'stalking'. According to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, stalking is a sexual offence and has a maximum sentence of ten years imprisonmen (the minimum being three years). The High Court, in fact, gave additional directives to address the issue of stalking. These include - counselors for victims of stalking, separate cells at every police station across the country to deal with stalking cases and bringing all cyber cafes (from where stalkers often harass girls through social media) under registration. Interestingly, in 2010, the HC had ordered deputy commissioners of all districts and some other government agencies to be vigilant about stalking and take steps to stop the crime.

Despite such strong messages from the High Court, stalking is still a reality for most young girls. The fear that their pubescent daughter will be harassed on the streets or worse, be kidnapped and raped, prompts parents to marry her off as early as possible, forcing her to drop out of school. Stalking, therefore, is a prime cause of child marriage which spares the child from sexual harassment on the streets but locks her into a prison of systematic sexual

upazila highups or OCs, must be motivated to take reports of sexual harassment seriously and catch the offenders promptly. The state must ensure that stalkers and sex offenders do not get away by using influence and money.

But what about the biggest challenge - how do we change public perception of stalking? For decades, our society, in the cities and villages, have shown inordinate indulgence to louts making catcalls, lewd gestures or even physically touching girls and women. They do this on the streets, inside buses or underpasses, on the footbridges - it could be any public place. The girls try to ignore the daily harassment and tolerate it as part of being female. But what about the rest of the people why do they not find it objectionable, unless one of their



abuse within the legitimate walls of her husband's home. The State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Ministry, Meher Afroz Chumki, seems to be taking some decisive steps to address sexual harassment of girls and women. She has said that her ministry will ask all deputy commissioners to form committees at all education institutes to hear complaints of sexual harassment and take appropriate action.

Such committees, if they actually materialise, could be the beginning of a conscious effort to acknowledge the criminality of stalking. Schools and colleges have to take initiatives to make sure their students, whether inside the school or outside, are not harassed and, if they are, that they can complain to the committee, which can then take action with the help of the law. Public officials, whether they are

own is victimised? Aggressive, sexually predatory behaviour towards women is justified as something that males cannot help having, hence the 'boys will be boys' expression used universally. It is the tacit acceptance of this malaise by society in general that needs to be discarded for good through intensive social messages on television, radio, in cinema, street drama and through programmes that target young people. Public shaming of any form of sexual harassment must go hand in hand with enforcement of anti-stalking laws. It is only when society wholeheartedly condemns this evil and shuns it as something despicable that girls and women will be free of the daily trauma they face on the streets.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Counter-radicalisation programme

Bangladesh has been successful in containing religious terrorism perpetrated by misguided elements. However, the memories of August 21 grenade attack, Bangla Bhai, JMB, etc., are still fresh in our minds. Now and then members of groups like Ansarullah Bangla Team, Hamza Brigade, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, etc., are nabbed. It's a long war ahead. There is no scope for complacency and 'take it easy' attitude.

The ISIS activities have made the situation more difficult. Young people are being brainwashed by them. Bangladesh government should commence a counter-radicalisation programme. The core of the programme should embody a willingness to

work with entities that send young people the right . kinds of messages. Schools, madrasas and youth groups should have courses that emphasise tolerance and good work. Teachers of schools, colleges and universities and imams can play a vital role in this regard. TV, radio, internet, books and newspapers can be effective too. Our secular and liberal values, hard earned independence and the bright future of Bangladeshis cannot allowed to be held hostage or snatched away by such misguided elements.

Dr. SN Mamoon On e-mail

Beating up kids for poor results

Recently one of my relatives mercilessly beat up her nine-year-old daughter because she failed her mathematics class test. Consequently, the girl fell ill and suffered from severe fever.

I am really worried about the mental development of children like her who get beaten up or punished severely by their parents for not scoring good marks in exams. We should consider this issue very seriously or it will bring disastrous consequences for our children. Jerry Cornelius Cardoza

Farmgate, Dhaka