

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY DECEMBER 10, 2015

## Open sewer trap

WASA must take blame

LAST year, we watched with horror the fate of four-year-old Jihad who had fallen down an unguarded borehole and the saga that unfolded in the botched attempt by the fire brigade to rescue him. The drama gripped the nation and the boy's dead body was finally recovered, not by the authorities concerned, but a group of young people who designed a makeshift rescue contraption. This time around, we are confronted by the death of young Nirob Hossain, a five-year-old who disappeared after falling down a sewer in Shyampur area of the capital on December 8. Nirob landed in a storm sewer that was left open and unguarded and was ultimately flushed out in the Buriganga River after five hours.

This is death due to negligence, pure and simple. We would like to know who is responsible for this. It had to be the death of an unfortunate young child for us to wake up to the gross oversight of the concerned departments. What has been allowed to happen is tantamount to murder and it should be treated as such, and whoever is responsible needs to be brought before the law to answer for criminal conduct.

It is perhaps time that the apex court in the land issues a rule upon authorities like Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA) to start compensating the families of victims like Nirob for allowing death traps like sewers to be left open. WASA must ensure that all such exposed manholes are covered immediately.

## 237 arches for the home minister!

Seeking favour must be the motive

WE are astounded at the ostentatious reception arranged for the home minister at Feni on his way to Khagrachari. The local AL lawmaker and his party men put up 273 arches, each costing Tk 9,000, at a 27 kilometre stretch along the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. We wonder, why this lavish treatment? The MP has claimed that this was a show of love for the minister by the local party men. But why is it for the home minister? He is not even a representative of the area. Even if he was, such wastefulness displays a lack of taste. More importantly, we would like to know: who will foot the bill? To the public this is a senseless waste of money especially when we see major development projects remaining suspended in the area for years due to shortage of funds.

Surprisingly, the minister actually appreciated the pomp and show. Why are our ministers so fond of such blatant fawning? Why don't our public representatives show such loyalty to the people to whom they are oath bound to serve while in their privileged positions? It's time that the political parties instructed their party members and senior leaders not to indulge in such irrational and wasteful display of 'affection'.

SULTANA KAMAL

FIFTY years ago, in 1966, the UN adopted two covenants – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted earlier in 1948. Together, these three covenants are regarded as the International Bill of Human Rights. It was initially supposed to be a single bill thinking that the UN would formulate a complete document on human rights that would be unanimously accepted, but for reasons unknown, three separate documents had to be produced.

The theme of this year's Human Rights Day is – "Our Rights. Our Freedoms. Always." For Bangladesh, this has been a year in which the freedom to exercise such rights have been blatantly ignored. From the freedom of life to freedom of livelihood, from the freedom of thought to freedom of expression, from the freedom of holding dissenting views to peacefully expressing them have all been flagrantly disregarded.

The beginning of 2015 was marked by political violence just as it was in 2014. The opposition parties called a rally for January 5 this year to demand fresh national elections by cancelling last year's January 5 polls that were boycotted by the main opposition. The government was adamant not to permit the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to hold rallies while the BNP chairperson was confined to her office.

The government's rationale for doing so was apparently to avert possible acts of subversion. The indefinite blockade called by the opposition came into force across the country the following day, characterised by unprecedented violence. The blockade was carried on for 66 consecutive days. At least 70 people died in bomb attacks during this period. Women, children and the elderly – no one was spared from the attacks. Educational institutions including schools were also targets of attack. Vehicles carrying textbooks were set on fire. Almost all who died and were injured were commoners, mostly poor bus drivers, truckers, helpers and people who had no direct involvement in politics.

This was also the period when law enforcement agencies exerted excessive force. According to our account, 47 people were subjected to enforced disappearance between January and October. As of November 2015, 153 people were killed in so-called crossfire and gunfights. The majority of the victims of extrajudicial killings were opposition activists. Law enforcement agencies as usual have denied

responsibility for the killings but families of most of the victims claimed that they [victims] had been picked up by men identifying themselves as law enforcement officials.

The overall picture of freedom of expression and press freedom has been worrisome this year. Not only have writers promoting freethinking and publishers publishing such works been killed in heinous attacks, there have also been attempts to silence dissenting voices through legal, administrative and judicial means. There has been no measure to discourage the intense intolerance towards dissenting opinions. Rather, such intolerance has been allowed to grow.

Science writer and founder of Mukto-mona Blog Avijit Roy was hacked to death while returning from Amar Ekushey Book Fair on February 26. His wife and co-writer Rafida Ahmed Bonya was also critically injured. Police were present near the scene of the attack but they failed to act promptly. Avijit's killing apparently turned the country into a death valley for freethinking authors and publishers as five such writers and publishers were brutally killed one after the other. As of November, two were injured and many are living in constant fear. Luminaries such as Dr Anisuzzaman, Hasan Azizul Haque and many other eminent writers and intellectuals have received death threats.

Suspects have been arrested in connection with the murders but law enforcement officials could not confirm if the arrestees were the real killers. The trials of the cases are progressing at a snail's pace while criminals have reasons to be incited by the comments of many government high-ups.

We have repeatedly voiced our concern about Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, which contains elements that attempt to curb dissenting opinions and curtail freedom of expression. The arrest and remand of journalist Probrir Sikdar under this Act and later his hasty release on bail was the most talked about incident in this regard. It was alleged that Probrir Sikdar was arrested and taken to remand under this Act as he took a stand against the interests of influential people, but he was later granted bail after an order from the highest level of the state machinery.

Another incident in which the legal system was used arbitrarily was the arrest and remand of volunteers of Adama Foundation, which works for street children. They were granted bail after nearly two months at the intervention from the highest level of government. The fact that the victims were bailed out in both the incidents brought relief but

the manner of involvement of legal institutions as well as the authorities concerned is a cause for grave concern. Meanwhile, as I write this, it has been nearly a month since social media platforms such as Facebook, Viber and WhatsApp have been blocked.

This year, we were exposed to a shocking picture of human trafficking that included the discovery of numerous mass graves of Bangladeshis and Myanmar's Rohingyas in Thailand and Malaysia, and the loss of more than a hundred lives during scuffles at sea near Indonesia's Aceh coast.

These are the reports that remind us how unemployed, fortune-seeking Bangladeshis are embarking on perilous journeys to Malaysia after falling prey to human smugglers or because of the lack of initiatives that allow them to go abroad legally. Sadly, we do not see any

politicians, and the attempt by the state to give them impunity. There were several incidents that reminded us of the sad reality that not all citizens are equal before the law. The incidents include Chhatra League and Jubo League infighting, a child getting injured in her mother's womb during a political clash and another shot by a lawmaker, and the underage nephew of an influential politician injuring pedestrians during reckless driving and the subsequent attempt by police to save him.

As for freedom to hold political meetings and rallies, the picture is sadly the same. In essence, opposition parties were not allowed to hold any meeting or rally while the party activists were arrested randomly on different grounds and were rejected bail.

Public protests have also been foiled by police who have used excessive force; this is completely unacceptable. These include protests against sexual harassment of women during Bangla new year celebrations, protests by teachers to press home their demands, students protests against question paper leaks, protests against the government's decision to set up Rampal power plant and rallies arranged by the indigenous communities, be it for protecting their lands or celebrating festivals.

The use of excessive force by police during a protest against the assault of a woman in the presence of her son in Tangail's Kalihati on September was beyond proportion. Three people were killed and many were shot when police exerted force on the protesters.

The rise of religious extremism this year is another issue that has been a cause for concern. Bangladeshi and foreign nationals have been killed and threatened in the name of different militant groups and the Shia community has been attacked for the first time in the country's history. The government has either decided to be in complete denial or has tried to blame the opposition.

We have noticed with concern that the state and its institutions are getting increasingly intolerant. The state is resorting to repression in the name of ensuring sovereignty and security.

But we need to be mindful that the sovereignty of the state is ultimately related to the sovereignty of its people. The state can truly ensure security by completely including the people in decision-making processes instead of isolating them. This integration is not possible unless people's freedom and human rights are safeguarded.

The writer is Executive Director, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and former advisor to the Caretaker Government.

(Translated from Bengali)

# HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2015 WHERE ARE WE?

*We have noticed with concern that the state and its institutions are getting increasingly intolerant. The state is resorting to repression in the name of ensuring sovereignty and security.*

legal measure being taken against traffickers.

This year, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has evaluated the child rights situation in Bangladesh. We have been hailed for a number of steps taken for the welfare of children but this year will be particularly remembered for the horrendous cases of child killing. It is not merely the number of children killed but the cruelty they were subjected to that indicates how sick the society has become. Most of the children killed were engaged in child labour. Seven children were killed in seven days from July 29 to August 4. We have, however, seen how rapidly justice was served in cases filed over the killing of Rajon, Rakib and Sayeed, but all these child abuse cases remind us of the necessity of being more aware of how we treat children.

A matter of serious concern this year was the reckless behaviour of government officials and influential

## A Personal Tribute to Dr CS Karim

WALI-UL-MAROOF MATIN

DR Chowdhury Sajjad Karim, popularly known as Dr CS Karim, passed away on November 19, 2015 at 67 years. Karim will remain forever in the hearts of his colleagues, friends and relatives; his wisdom will surely be missed.

He was a scientist. Be it in education, profession or his day-to-day life and thoughts, he always practiced science. I realised this first during the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. The frightening news that the Russian atomic power plant had exploded, spreading radiation poison, reached Dhaka pretty quickly. I wanted to understand how it happened and what could be the consequences. I called Dr CS Karim, who was then a scientist at the Atomic Energy Commission. Dr Karim had studied the direction of air-currents of Earth and assured me, and probably many others, that the radiation would not travel this far.

Many years later, when he was the Chairman of the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, I bumped into him in an airport. Dr Karim spoke about the risks of earthquakes in Bangladesh, and informed me about the ticking time-bomb called the Dauki fault line, which could be the epicentre of a disastrous tremor in Bangladesh.

Dr Karim started his career at the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission in 1977 and retired as the Chairman of the Commission in 2006. He served in the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh and held the portfolios of the Ministry of Agriculture (2007-8); Ministries of Fisheries and Livestock, and Environment and Forests (2007); and Ministry of Water Resources (2008). Later, he worked as a consultant for the World Bank and the FAO.

His association with the caretaker government was not quite appreciated by some of his friends. However, he was never bothered about politics. He probably did not understand it or found it to be more complicated and uninteresting than nuclear physics.

I loved talking to him, not to learn science to be honest, but primarily to savour his wonderful sense of humour. Noakhali was his beloved home district and he would often crack jokes about his home district that were hilarious but inoffensive.

However, during disasters such as cyclone Aila, he deeply mourned for the wounded in the Sundarbans. He mourned for the lands submerged in saline water. His conversations always personified nature, the flora and fauna, as if they were his personal friends.

He was also a very affectionate person and his love for his son, niece, nephews, sisters, brothers, friends and also his domestic aides has always been reciprocated. Dr CS Karim was the epitome of wisdom, love and commitment to the nation.

The writer is Managing Director, Chittagong Stock Exchange, Bangladesh.



ROBERT WATKINS

THIS day in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The date is a reminder of the common standard for a dignified life for all peoples in all nations. This year, we recall the fundamental freedoms that underpin human rights that are still relevant today, not only in Bangladesh but also globally, i.e. freedom from fear and want and freedom of speech and worship. As the theme and slogan for 2015 reads, these are "Our Freedoms – Our Rights – Always".

Bangladesh has voluntarily taken obligations under eight international human rights treaties, and therefore committed to provide civil, cultural, economic, social or political rights to all its individuals and peoples, without distinction of any kind. Over the years, Bangladesh has regularly engaged with the United Nations on issues such as ending discrimination against women and girls, and ensuring the rights of the child. During 2015, Bangladesh also engaged on civil and political rights reporting and hosted the visit of the Special Rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council on freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, Bangladesh is currently a member of the Human Rights Council and has established a National Human Rights Commission which brings further responsibilities, both at the international and national level. This clearly shows Bangladesh's desire to be a part of the global community promoting human rights.

Bangladesh's socio-economic strides over the last decade have contributed to the enjoyment of human rights in education, health, and work. However, this progress is not reaching all, and some are potentially falling behind, in particular, those who may not have a legal status in the country. Furthermore, economic and geographical disparities, and

## A life of dignity for all

discrimination against women, are still present. Recent global development processes, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlight the need to address inequality in order to ensure progress for everyone. This is a clear message and provides focus and guidance for the future.

In Bangladesh, the National Development Plan provides the entry point and platform for progress in addressing inequalities. The Plan is

rights can also be enjoyed. The freedom from fear is as important as the freedom from want. Bangladesh is a young nation that still struggles with its past which influences the overall environment of civil and political rights. The Constitution includes fundamental rights and references to personal liberty; safeguards as to arrest and detention; respect of trial; freedoms of movement, assembly and association and; freedoms of religion, conscience and speech. While this is welcomed, some challenges

ble are prosecuted and punished if violations have occurred. This is part of effective national protection systems and inextricable from developmental progress.

Today also symbolises the 16th day of activism to end violence against women. The intersection with Human Rights Day reminds us that violence against women constitutes a human rights violation and needs to be addressed with utmost seriousness and vigour. Violence has very real consequences on the ability of



aligned with the newly adopted SDGs and coupled with national targeting, robust monitoring, effective implementation and follow-up structures, including participatory processes which will help to ensure that no one is left behind when the nation is progressing. The National Human Rights Commission can play a vital role here, for example, through monitoring rights-based implementation.

But human rights are not only social and economic in nature. Life in dignity does not exist unless civil and political

and inconsistencies in legislation and implementation have been observed and issues such as deaths in custody or during arrests, interference with investigations and judicial procedures, abductions or disappearances, arbitrary arrests and intimidation of journalists, members of opposition and civil society actors, and violence against and harassment of women and girls, etc., continue to be reported. It is of utmost importance that all such allegations are investigated through credible and independent inquiry bodies and that those responsi-

women and girls to contribute to society. By overlooking this, we risk undermining social values and the potential for future progress.

While the journey to the full enjoyment of human rights is on-going, and never-ending, this day reminds us of what remains to be done and the importance of the participation and contribution of each and every one of us to ensure a life of dignity for all.

The writer is United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh.