

Scrap projects of destruction

ANU MUHAMMAD

I first visited Bashkhali in 1991, immediately after a deadly cyclone devastated the area. I could not walk without touching a dead body or its parts; I could not see even an inch of area which had not been destroyed by the natural disaster. In this coastal area, people live on and struggle with the Bay of Bengal; they live with its resources and also with its rage. With the growing risks of climate change, there is the possibility of even more destructive natural disasters, along with increasing sea levels. Since the lives of its inhabitants are highly vulnerable here, for them development means protection and safety; it means creating livelihoods that will be less vulnerable; it means a life without fear and uncertainty. Instead, the people of Bashkhali are confronted with a project which gives rise to more risks, fear and uncertainty. They were terrorised by the possible consequences of a coal-fired power plant, and felt outraged by the harassment and lies of the officials of the plant. They gathered to express their fear; they were answered with bullets.

We feel sad, we feel angry too. If development means destruction of people's shelter, biodiversity, killing of river, forest and the people, we will continue to oppose this; we will call upon everybody on this earth to make this opposition stronger, to create momentum to bring a real change in development thinking. We will give strength to collective voices to bring the real vision of development to the political agenda.

The recent tragic incident, which I may call 'development killing', in Bashkhali is a manifestation of state-business nexus. Ignoring public opinion, there was an unholy alliance between state officials and corporate



Protestors at Bashkhali.

PHOTO: STAR

groups. The killing of unarmed innocent people was perhaps an unexplained expression of their 'way of doing things'.

The incident centred around a 1,224 MW coal-fired power project, jointly owned by S. Alam Group - a Bangladeshi business house - and two Chinese companies, SEPCOIII Electric Power and HTG, with whom they signed an agreement in 2013 to set up the plant. On February 16, 2016, the government of Bangladesh approved the deal and set a price to purchase electricity from the group at a rate of BDT 6.61 per unit. The group started to acquire 600 acres of land for this plant.

Surprisingly, all these steps were taken without any Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and public

consultation. There was no environmental clearance. Furthermore, residents of the area were sceptical and afraid, because of their experience with coercion and fraudulence in land purchasing. Lack of transparency and irregularities were quite noticeable from the very beginning of the project. The local administration had shown a total of only 150 households in the project area, but in reality the area has at least 7,000 households, 70 mosques, graveyards, a technical education institution, around 20 cyclone shelter houses, one high school, eight primary government schools, two Alia Madrassa, five Qawmi Madrassa, five markets, and one government hospital. Hiding the real numbers is a familiar practice to rationalise the

project and also to ease the handover of *khas* (government) land to the private company.

Most of the people in this area are poor but hard working people engaged in salt farming, and various fish and agro-cultivation. For months, hollow promises packaged with assaults and threats had ensued. People had tried to negotiate over the choice of location of the plant, appealing to the authorities to spare them from a deadly project. On March 23, a peaceful gathering was organised in the area, with the presence of officials from the administration, in which around 30,000 people had participated. They demanded that the project be shifted elsewhere and their grabbed land be returned to them. However, it seemed

as if nobody from the government or the concerned company really bothered to pay heed to their concerns, as they proceeded with the coercive measures.

On April 3, police arrested seven people from the village, accusing them of obstructing the company's work. That triggered discontent among the common people, bringing them together in a protest meeting on April 4, 2016, under the banner of "Boshot Bhita Rokkha Committee" (Committee to Protect Households). Meanwhile, some locals, allegedly paid by the company, called for a counter programme in the same location to wreck the event. Moreover, as an eyewitness described, while the angry protestors continued to gather on the spot, hired goons arrived there with 30 to 40 motorcycles. They began to fire on the unarmed villagers. Instead of stopping and arresting the armed miscreants, the police allegedly joined them in firing upon the poor, unprotected people. A large number of protestors were shot on the spot, and at least five were killed.

People did not gather to beat anybody or disturb peace. Their demands were simple: first, free the arrested villagers; and second, stop harassment of inhabitants by middlemen and goons who forcibly try to purchase and grab lands. They also wanted a transparent hearing process on the pros and cons of constructing a coal-fired power plant in the area. They had arguments on the possible environmental and social impacts of the power plant in the area; they were demanding satisfactory answers on why the location of the plant should not be shifted.

The role of the police and government administration appears questionable at best. Even after killing people, they filed cases against

the villagers, continued arresting and terrorising them. They even arrested people with bullet injuries admitted to the hospital, and put them in handcuffs. Male villagers are forced to sleep in the open to avert arrest, and also to guard the area against any terrorist attacks.

We would like to ask, if the state chooses to call it 'development', how come there is no space for public opinion? Why such atrocity? Why is the government so afraid of protests? Where is the EIA and clearance? What sort of democracy is this in which the police administration and armed goons jointly assault unarmed people?

As long as the assaults, threats, land grabbing and eviction continue in the name of development, discontent will prevail. If the interest and consent of people are not prioritised, they will reject every so-called development project. People gave lives in Phulbari to save the country; they have been waging struggles to save the Sundarbans and have showed their readiness to sacrifice their lives to protect the future generation in Bashkhali.

The attitude of hiding, twisting and denying facts must be changed; the government should move quickly to conduct an independent inquiry to ensure exemplary punishment for those responsible for killing innocent villagers. It should also abandon this practice of pushing through questionable projects. Finally, the government must scrap projects of environmental destruction, along with projects embroiled in irregularities and corruption, and which pose a threat to human livelihoods, including coal fired power plants in Bashkhali and Rampal.

The writer is Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University and Member Secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil- Gas- Mineral Resources, Port and Power. Email: anujuniv@gmail.com.

SPECTRUM FACTORY COLLAPSE A lesson on lessons not learnt



SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

ELEVEN years ago, on a hot, stuffy day not unlike today, a building had come crashing down on the sweating workers of a sweater factory. It was 1 am, and the late night workers had been waiting for their supervisor to arrive with some food - a cake, some fruits and an egg - to get them through the long, stifling night. Without prior warning, the floor had started to oscillate, and then, before they could grasp what was happening, the workers had sunk further and further into the ground, as the building crumpled like a pack of cards. What was an eight-storey building became, moments later, a three-storey pile of rubble and a mass graveyard.

In the rescue mission that ensued for the next eight days, at least 64 dead bodies were recovered, only two of whom were women, including a seven-month pregnant worker. As many as 80 percent had worked in the factory for less than a year, and almost half of the deceased had a spouse and children who were less than 5-years-old. An overwhelming majority of those who died were breadwinners of their families, taking care of at least 118 dependents in total, in addition to their immediate spouse and children. Around 80- 100 workers were injured; 54 workers were officially classified as "seriously injured" - 55 percent of whom were under the age of 25.

According to official count, there were 184 workers in the factory at the time, but workers stated that the actual number was closer to 400. Since the factory conveniently "lost" the register in which the names of the workers were noted down - it was allegedly destroyed during the building collapse - it could not be confirmed how many workers had been

employed by the two factories, Shahriyar Fashions and Spectrum, which were housed in the building. In the end, even though workers and labour unions stated that 4,000-5,000 people had worked there, officials put the number at 2,700. The BGMEA, with its makeshift stall, could only identify 918 workers, and made no real efforts beyond putting an ad in the papers to track down all the workers. The reason I list this failure to 'list' is that, eleven years on, we still confront the same problem every time there is an industrial "accident"; inevitably, the register gets lost; inevitably, in the absence of official appointment letters, there is a discrepancy in the statistics presented by the owners and the labour unions. Inevitably, there is chaos and confusion when it comes to identifying "missing" workers and providing compensation. There is as yet no central database with undated information on workers employed at BGMEA member factories, despite promises made by the owners' association to collate the necessary information five years ago.

The Spectrum factory was built flouting multiple building codes, on top of a flood-prone former swamp. Although it had permission for only four floors, the factory owners constructed an additional four floors, allegedly duping the authorities. That the owners were to be blamed for the sub par construction goes without saying, but what of the authorities whose very mandate it was to oversee plans and ensure that the buildings were constructed following the very designs that they had approved? Although Rajuk announced a committee to investigate the causes of the collapse, the full report was never made public. Predictably, no efforts were made to identify the role of the authorities in overlooking the gross violations of building codes that led to the building collapse.

In November of 2006, the government finally passed the National Building Code to

establish "minimum standards for design, construction, quality of materials, use and occupancy, location and maintenance of all buildings within Bangladesh in order to safeguard, within achievable limits, life, limb, health, property and public welfare." A long-awaited intervention, no doubt, but the extent to which the code has been implemented is obvious from the alarming number of "accidents" that have taken place since Spectrum, including the Rana Plaza collapse, which claimed the lives of over a thousand workers. Eleven years on, the provision of formation of a Building Monitoring Authority still remains unenforced, despite a petition filed in 2008, and an order from the High Court in 2013 that a Building Code Enforcement Agency be established within three months to monitor compliance with the National Building Code. How many more lives must be lost before we find it within ourselves to prioritise the issue of compliance is a question to which there can't be a humane answer; so rather than ask uncomfortable questions that "dishonour" our honourable RMG producers, let us be content with the well-orchestrated, well-publicised endeavours to prove that all our factories are compliant, with but a few "rotten eggs."

Spectrum and Shahriyar Fabrics produced orders from a range of European companies including Inditex (Spain), Carrefour, Solo Invest, CMT Windfield (France), Cotton Group (Belgium), Karstadt Quelle, New Yorker, Bluhmod (Germany), Scapino (Netherlands), and New Wave Group (Sweden). The foreign buyers were on the spotlight with the collapse of Spectrum, and lost no time in threatening to withdraw their business from Bangladesh unless it improved its safety standards. Of course, they conveniently forgot to acknowledge how the compliance costs have to be borne by the manufacturer, while the buyers continue to make the decision of where to buy from based on the lowest price and quality of

product. Following widespread international pressure, there was an initial agreement among some of the brands to establish a voluntary fund to properly compensate injured workers and the families of the deceased, but in the end, only one company, Inditex, provided compensation to the workers; all other brands backed out, fearing it would set a dangerous precedent for industrial accidents and arguing that the responsibility of providing compensation fell upon the state and national bodies. There was, in short, blatant refusal on the part of the brands to take joint responsibility for the deaths of the workers. While they took a holier-than-thou attitude in blaming the Bangladeshi authorities, none of the brands revealed their auditing reports, ignoring the demands of the national and international labour organisations. Notably, the BGMEA also did not publicly disclose reports on their fire safety programme at Spectrum Sweater.

Meanwhile, although 45 cases were filed against the factory owners, Shahriyar Sayeed Hassan and Abul Hashem Fakir, according to Sayeed Salahuddin Ahmed, the Asst. Managing Director of Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, no action has been taken against the owners. Even the hearing on the writ petition by four

human rights organisations in 2005, demanding that the cause of the collapse be investigated and the culprits identified, is still pending to this day. Despite the myriad investigations conducted to probe the causes and the flood of promises of "exemplary action against the perpetrators", eleven years on, we face the all too familiar reality of "no one killed the Spectrum workers". If the owners, owners' association, buyers and authorities are all spared the rod, what incentive is there really to ensure basic safety codes at higher costs? Why would we expect owners to mend their ways when they already have complete impunity to risk workers' lives?

Our failure to have learnt our lesson from Spectrum resulted in Hameem, in Tazreen, in Rana Plaza; our consistent failures to learn from each of these tragic and murderous incidents have only weakened our industry, and caused irreparable damage to the country, its people and its so-called image. Till we have closure for the untimely deaths at Spectrum, at Garib and Garib, at Tazreen, at Rana Plaza, till we learn the harsh lessons, how can we truly expect to move forward?

The writer is a Journalist and activist.

QUOTABLE Quote

ETEL ADNAN
Lebanese-American poet, essayist and virtual artist

[But] a woman who stands up to them and looks them in the eye is a tree to be cut down, and they cut it down. She falls with the sound of dead wood which disappears among the perfidious murmurings of the city, and to the smirking of other women who are satisfied with the male victories.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Showy parrots
- Plot unit
- Tooth layer
- Seasonal song
- Mickey's company
- Brazenness
- Invited
- Contradict
- Not so much
- Aide
- Conform
- Nuisance
- Gold-loving king
- Fall quaff
- Heidi's home
- Blues-based music
- Thin cut
- Mysterious
- Welles role

40 Approached

DOWN

- Military award
- Biscotti flavor
- Winery storage
- Memory loss
- Hoe target
- Crafty
- Brat's opposite
- Anthrax source
- Take over for
- Queen of mystery
- Kicked off
- Dagger parts
- Losing plans
- Francois has one
- # 1 on a lane
- Pudding choice
- Rich fabric
- Cut's counter part
- Painter Degas
- Prism sight
- Cornered
- Heart
- Criminalize

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	L	P	H	A	T	A	R	T	S
N	O	L	A	N	A	V	A	I	L
S	C	A	L	D	W	A	S	T	E
W	A	Y	I	N	N	P	I	E	
R	E	D	H	O	T	D	E	N	S
T	E	N	F	O	U	R			
A	S	H	E	V	E	R	S	E	
T	H	E	L	I	E	Y	A	M	
R	E	F	E	R	R	F	L	O	
E	N	O	L	A	A	D	O	U	T
S	T	O	O	D	C	N	O	T	E
T	O	L	L	S	T	A	L	E	S

Office of the Project Director
"Development of Technology for the Production of Low Cost Solar Power"
BCSIR, Dr. Quadrat-i-Khuda Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205

Invitation for Tender

1	Ministry/division	Ministry of Science and Technology.		
2	Agency	Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR).		
3	Procuring entity name	Project Director, "Development of Technology for the Production of Low Cost Solar Power (1st Revised)".		
4	Procuring entity district	Dhaka.		
5	Invitation for	Supply, Installation, Testing and Commissioning of Raw Materials and Spares.		
6	Invitation Ref No. & date	39.347.014.01.00.047.2016; 06.04.2016		
7	Procurement method	Open Tendering Method (OTM).		
8	Budget and source of funds	GoB.		
9	Tender publication date	11.04.2016		
10	Tender last selling date	01.05.2016 up to 17.00pm.		
11	Tender closing date and time	02.05.2016 up to 12.00 noon.		
12	Tender opening date and time	02.05.2016, 14.30pm.		
13	Name & address of the offices of selling and receiving tender document	1. Office of the Project Director, "Development of Technology for the Production of Low Cost Solar Power (1st Revised)", Address: IFRD, BCSIR, Dr. Quadrat-i-Khuda Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205. 2. Leather Research Institute, Nayerhat, Savar, Dhaka. Tender documents can be submitted during office hour on or before submission date by post or directly.		
14	Name & address of the office of opening of tender document	Office of the Project Director, "Development of Technology for the Production of Low Cost Solar Power (1st Revised)", Address: IFRD, BCSIR, Dr. Quadrat-i-Khuda Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205.		
15	Eligibility of tenderer	Minimum 3 years specific experience as a supplier of Scientific Raw Materials and Spares. Other terms & conditions should be followed according to the tender document.		
16	Brief description of goods	Raw Materials (Targets, Accessories).		
17	Brief description of related service	As per attached specification in the tender schedule.		
18	Tender document price	Tk. 2,000/- (two thousand only), non-refundable.		
19	Lot No.	Identification of lot	Tender security amount in Taka	Completion time in weeks/months
	Lot-01	Supply, Installation, testing and Commissioning of Raw Materials and Spares	3,50,000.00	40 days from the date of signing of contact
20	Name of official inviting tender	Muhammad Shahriar Bashar.		
21	Designation of official inviting tender	Project Director.		
22	Address of official inviting tender	IFRD, BCSIR, Dr. Quadrat-i-Khuda Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205.		
23	Contact details of official inviting tender	Mobile: 01552332588	e-mail: solar.bcsir@gmail.com	
24	Special instruction:	The procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject all tenders prior to acceptance without assigning any reason whatever.		

-Sd-
Muhammad Shahriar Bashar
Project Director

GD-819