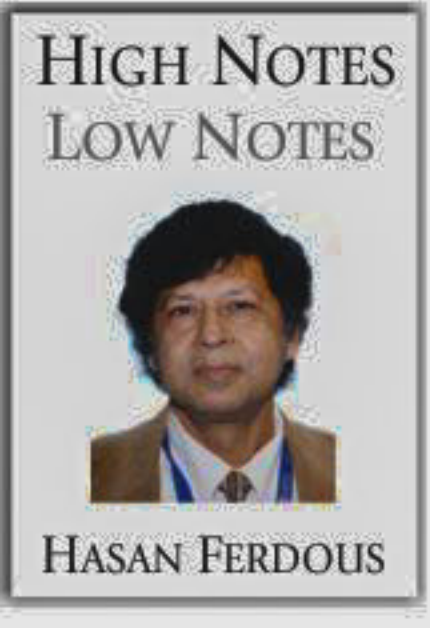


Silent death, unrecognised



HASAN FERDOUS

HIGH NOTES
LOW NOTES

WEDNESDAY, May 4, was a great day for eight-year-old Mari Copeny. At her request, President Obama visited Flint, her home town in Michigan. For more than two years, more than 100,000 residents have been drinking tap water supplied by the city that was laced with high-levels of lead. It happened after the city officials switched from Detroit water to unfiltered Flint River water, all in the name of saving money.

In a letter, Copney told the president, "The water here smells like bleach and old fish."

I don't know how water laced with arsenic smells or tastes. You will have to ask Anowara Begum of Iruain village in Laskham, Comilla. A woman in her 60s, Anowara and thousand others like her have been drinking this water for the past several years, exposing themselves to serious diseases. Like lead, arsenic can cause serious health conditions, and even death.

In Flint, many children may have already been affected by lead poisoning, causing physical and mental damages. However, there is good news for Flint's residents. The federal government has stepped in, pouring millions of dollars to fix the problem. As steps are taken to change the pipelines one house at a time, bottled water is being trucked in – in millions – for local residents that will hopefully last for the next several months. On a separate track, legal action is being taken against those found responsible. A city official and two state environmental officials have already been indicted. More could soon be implicated.

Mari has good reason to feel hopeful. But the same can't be said for Anowara Begum. A recent report by Human Rights Watch, a US-based non-profit group, warns that as many as 20 million people in Bangladesh continue to drink arsenic-laced water, resulting in the death of an estimated 43,000 people every year. If the problem remains unaddressed, the report claims that between 1 and 5 million children born between 2000 and 2030 could

eventually die due to exposure to arsenic in drinking water.

When the US-based organisation issued its 110-page investigative report, the government readily dismissed it, calling it baseless. No one has died from arsenic poisoning in Bangladesh, government officials claimed. "This must be the work of an NGO," the minister in charge of local government theorised.

Human Rights Watch, not really an NGO that can be off-handedly dismissed, actually spent several weeks in five Bangladeshi villages, interviewing dozens of villagers and analysing data from nearly 125,000 government water points. The minister challenged news reporters of Dhaka to find one person affected by arsenic. The report actually documents several, their names and pictures splashed all over the internet. Anowara Begum is one of them.

Both WHO and UNICEF had painted a similar picture. Some 40 years ago, UN agencies like UNICEF and World Bank were in the lead to install tubewells for supplying fresh water to villagers in Bangladesh. Three decades later, the good tubewells turned bad, no longer able to pump safe water due to high levels of arsenic at the lower levels of ground water. In the 1990s, when the problem was identified, UNICEF readily

admitted its failure and promised to take action. Jointly with the government, it singled out the bad tubewells, marking them with red paint. Villagers were advised not to drink water from these tubewells. Over 20 years have passed, the problem still remains; people continue to suffer, even die, largely because they have no other option.

It is an old problem that made headlines in foreign newspapers after the World Health Organization termed the arsenic problem in Bangladesh "the largest mass poisoning of a population in history." Very few newspapers in Dhaka took note of the warning. In the early 1990s, *The New York Times* spent several weeks travelling all across Bangladesh before publishing a front-page report detailing the silent tragedy wreaking havoc in much of Bangladesh's rural areas. It followed up with several subsequent reports. I still remember the story of a young woman, who had patchy marks on her face and feet. Her husband no longer thought she was pretty, so he dumped her and took a second wife. "I now work as a maid servant at my husband's house," she said, still thankful that he did not chase her out.

Richard Pearhouse, the lead author of the Human Rights Watch report, told me a similar story. In one of the villages, he had met a young woman who was pregnant. She had dark patches all over her body. Worried,

she went to see a doctor at the upazila health complex who told her that it was important that she avoid drinking water with arsenic in it. However, she told Richard that she can't follow this advice because "there is no government tubewell around here that works."

Richard told me that the woman was acutely worried for her health and her children's health - she knew that the water she gives to her eight month old daughter will soon start affecting her baby's health. She said, "If there was a government tubewell I could use, even if it was far away, I would go there for my sake and also for my daughter's sake."

Why does Bangladesh – not just the government but the society as a whole – seem so oblivious to the plight of those affected by arsenic in drinking water? Richard had a simple answer: arsenic doesn't affect Bangladesh's cities, which get their water from safe sources. It only affects rural areas and mostly those who are poor.

"In rural areas, it affects the poorest of the poor, because they can't afford to move, or install deep tubewells that might give them arsenic-free water. Many of these people labour for a living – it's hot work under the sun all day long and they drink more than the average amount of water. The poor

people are those most affected by arsenic and these are the people that the government is failing. Instead, some politicians are giving tubewells to their political allies and their supporters."

In some ways, this situation is not that different from Flint, where those affected are mostly poor and belong to minority groups. Almost half of Flint's population is African-American and most of them live below the poverty line. Michael Moore, the documentary filmmaker, recently wrote in *Time* that the situation in Flint is basically racial in nature. "This is a racial crime. If it were happening in another country, we'd call it an ethnic cleansing," he wrote.

Mari and others in Flint finally have some good news. The most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States, came knocking on their door and sipped safe water with some of them. He even gave Mari a hug.

There is no such luck for those in Bangladesh, who are still forced to drink arsenic-laced water. In fact, the aforementioned minister does not even want to acknowledge that someone like Anowara Begum exists.

The writer is a journalist and author based in New York.



While Mari may get help, who will listen to Anwara's woes?



PHOTO: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Eviction without resettlement

Where will these low income communities go?

MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU and BIPASHA DUTTA

ON January 21, 2016, without any prior notice or proper rehabilitation plan, residents of the Kallyanpur Pora Bosti were evicted from their homes. Officials of the Housing and Building Research Institute (HBRI), local police and apparent outsiders jointly conducted the eviction. At least four people were injured during the eviction. Agitated locals had claimed that they were being evicted without any prior notice, and therefore, they threw brickbats at police and burned scrap materials in protest against the drive.

During the eviction, the high court issued a stay order based on the petition filed by Ain-o-Salish Kendra and residents of the slum. The court also ordered that the slum dwellers could not be evicted without any proper rehabilitation plan prepared for them. Though the eviction stopped after with the high court order, the slum had a fire 'accident' just a day after the drive. Several shops and houses were completely gutted. Apparently, firefighters faced obstacles by outsiders when they tried to enter the slum to douse the fire. The inhabitants of the *bosti* allege that the fire was a deliberate act so that they would be forced to leave.

After the eviction drive and the subsequent fire, a survey was conducted by Nagar Daridra

Basteebashir Unnayan Sangstha (NDBUS), which shows that the eviction drive was responsible for the demolition of around 200 shops and other parts of the slum. One block of the slum was completely destroyed while two other blocks were partially damaged. As a result of the 'illegal eviction', thousands of people from Kallyanpur Bosti were forced to spend days under the open skies, shivering through the cold month of January.

Around 1,200 families lost their homes while the drinking water supply system of the slum was damaged. In fact, even students had to face a heavy loss, as 25 SSC candidates lost their books and other study materials, thus making it impossible for them to take their exams this year.

10 pre-primary schools run by BRAC were completely destroyed.

Kallyanpur is just one of the many examples of eviction drives conducted all over the country frequently. The question here is why do the authorities conduct these kinds of drives so regularly? Does the government not consider the concerns of these low income groups? If they are indeed regarded as citizens of the country with rights like any other person belonging to a higher economic status, the government should formulate and implement rehabilitation strategies for these people before carrying out such drives.

28 percent of Bangladesh's population live in urban areas; 38 percent of this population live in slums. It is projected that half of the country's population will live in urban areas by 2030. In addition, each year around 350,000 people migrate to Dhaka in search of a better livelihood. Many come here after losing their homes to river bank erosions or climate change. A large segment of these people live in slums. Now, while the migration of people from rural to urban settings adds pressure on infrastructure, the environment and the delivery of basic services, there's no denying that these people are the driving force of the city's economy. However, the institutional strategies and frameworks of the government continue to neglect these groups of people.

World Bank projects the population of Dhaka to be 20 million by 2020, which means 2.8 million people are predicted to live in urban slums, amidst the constant threat of eviction. Though the exact number is not available, at least 1 lakh 20,000 people were displaced by evictions from Dhaka's slums between 2006 and 2011, without any specific rehabilitation plan. The number is only increasing over time.

In India, during the Delhi election, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) promised to recognise the contributions and necessities of low income communities, and even

started working on resettling them. They have already begun implementing slum rehabilitation programmes, and various government departments have already started shortlisting areas for the project. Under the plan, the land held by slum dwellers would be distributed in a ratio of 60:40 - 60 percent of the land would be used to build flats for slum dwellers by a private builder while the rest of the land would be used for developing a residential colony. The Delhi government also has plans of constructing community centres and parks for slum dwellers, while every colony will have a component with provisions for small slums, and domestic workers for the residents of these colonies will be employed from these slums. Thus, the population living on 60 percent of the land will get employment in the houses of those living in the remaining 40

percent. The idea is to provide them employment; additionally, they will be living in flats instead of *jhuggis* (slums).

On the other hand, Jakarta announced that by 2017 they will fulfil all the indicators where housing and resettlement of the slums dwellers are considered. They started collecting 20 percent land from landlords, that will eventually be distributed to the landless.

Unfortunately, the strategy of Bangladesh's government in the rehabilitation of slum dwellers seems to be going in the opposite direction, as the rights of low income groups are not even recognised. Rather, slum dwellers do not have access to institutional support and other basic amenities, including water, sanitation etc.

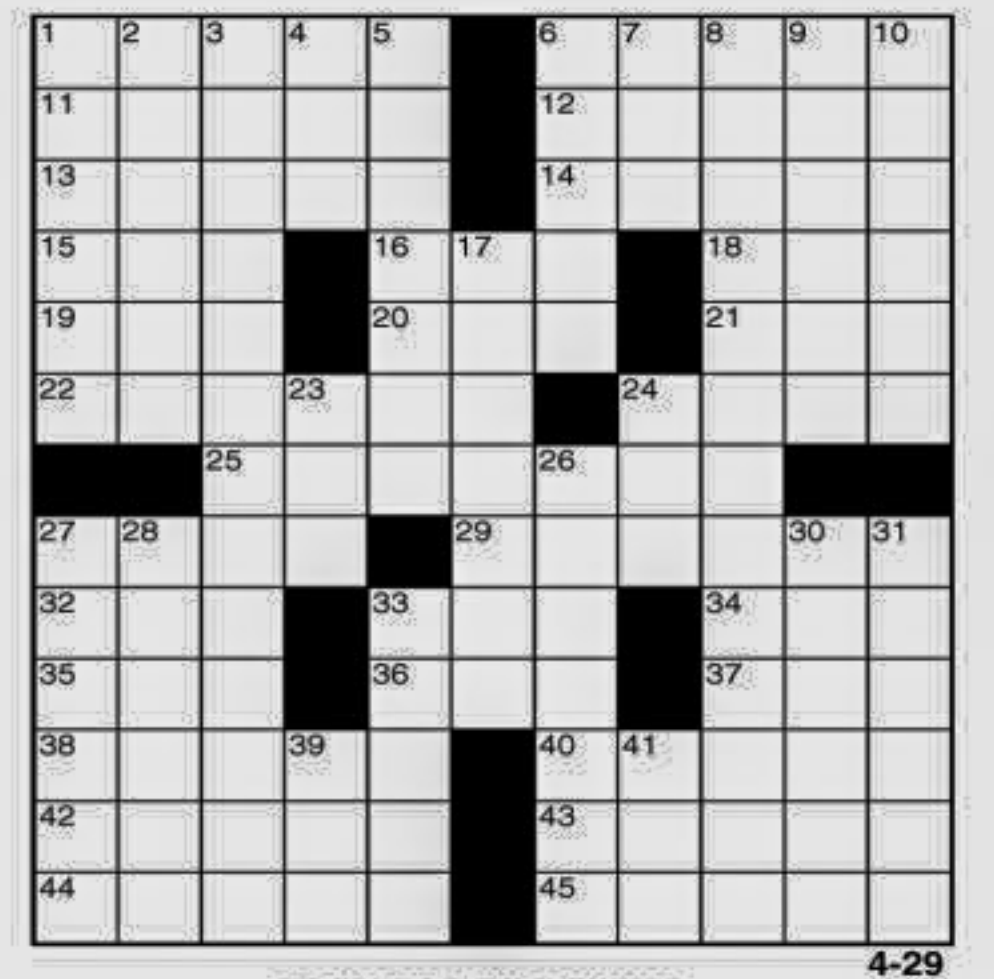
Slum dwellers are the rightful citizens of the country, and their rights are protected by Bangladesh's Constitution. Slum dwellers' existence and their contributions need to be recognised. Can you imagine a city without rickshaw pullers, drivers or house help who make your life so much easier? It is high time that we counted them as fellow human beings, and help them get their basic rights. A clear urban sector policy is the next critical step to ensure this.

Evicting people from their homes without their consent or rehabilitation plans is a gross violation of human rights. We are sure that city authorities and other relevant institutions will definitely agree with us.

The writers are Senior Team Leader for Technical Programme and National Lead for Urban Programming at World Vision Bangladesh, and National Urban Specialist at World Vision Bangladesh, respectively. Email: raju_ahmed07@yahoo.com

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Turning tool
 - 6 Aquarium fish
 - 11 Lucy's pal
 - 12 Arson yield
 - 13 School paper
 - 14 Blueprint data
 - 15 Greedy one
 - 16 Average grade
 - 18 Coffee, in slang
 - 19 French friend
 - 20 Road sealer
 - 21 Not at home
 - 22 Imposes, as a tax
 - 24 Nile reptiles
 - 25 Thorough
 - 27 Informer
 - 29 Composer Barber
 - 32 Nest holder
 - 33 Frank holder
 - 34 Will Smith biopic
 - 35 Leaf lifter
 - 36 -- tree
 - 37 Suede shade
 - 38 Categorizes
 - 40 Madame Curie
- DOWN**
- 1 Deadly
 - 2 Relaxed
 - 3 Shel Silverstein book
 - 4 Skirt edge
 - 5 Sent to Washington
 - 6 Stun gun
 - 7 Sixth sense
 - 8 U2 album
 - 9 Make back
 - 10 Useful skills
 - 17 Lessens the pressure
 - 23 Publicity
 - 24 Money machine
 - 26 Straw hats
 - 27 Big dinner
 - 28 Disregard
 - 30 Pal of George and Jerry
 - 31 Straight
 - 33 Police raids
 - 39 Smidge
 - 41 Skill



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

O	P	T	E	D	G	H	O	S	T
R	E	E	V	E	R	A	D	I	O
B	A	L	E	R	E	M	E	R	Y
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B	E	A	S	T	E	T	H	O	S

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