

Another slum fire

Rehabilitate the affected

A devastating fire in the Boubazar part of the Korail slum, home to about a couple of thousand inhabitants, has left hundreds of people homeless and helpless. Most of the residents there were either rickshaw pullers or garment workers — economically poor. And as reports have it, they were left with their families that include little children, shell-shocked by their circumstance, having witnessed their homes, belongings and savings, all destroyed.

Some people, including mostly women and children, were seen huddled together in groups just to keep themselves warm amidst the winter chill, while others desperately searched for their loved ones. In such a situation, one must again wonder whether anyone, including the government, cares about the plight of these people at all.

Because of narrow alleys inside the slum, firefighters had to leave their trucks about half a kilometre away, making it difficult for them to battle the flames. Fortunately, however, about 200 locals trained in firefighting had started the processes of dousing the fire even before the firefighters could get there. But how often do we see such fires destroying lives in slums across the country? Yet, because of some unscrupulous rent-seekers with powerful backing mostly from the powerful quarters, the situation never changes. And it is these poor people who are often victims to such misfortunes as well as exploitation by these powerful individuals.

The authorities should immediately look to stop these rent-seekers from abusing the poor living in slums by devising a comprehensive strategy that would protect their interest. Meanwhile, those who have lost everything in the most recent fire must be given immediate relief in terms of shelter and food with help from the civil society and also be rehabilitated.

Dhaka's main rivers dying

Pollution killing Dhaka's rivers

P LASMA Plus, a scientific research laboratory, has just concluded a study on behalf of Dhaka WASA on the pollution levels of the six major rivers (Turag, Balu, Sitalakkhya, Dhaleshwari and the Bangshi) that sustain the capital city and the results are not good. What was found is that most of the rivers scored “yellow”, indicating that the water is unsuitable for human consumption and may only be used for recreation, pisciculture and livestock. The heavy presence of organic micro-pollutants and heavy metals that are non-degradable make water of these rivers undrinkable. Little wonder that the Sayedabad Water Treatment plant has to use excessive ammonia to treat Sitalakkhya water to make it fit for human consumption.

This paper, along with environmentalists, the civil society and electronic media have been advocating since 2009 for authorities to wake up from their slumber to the fact that without a healthy river system, the continued existence of the capital city of some 20 million simply cannot be guaranteed. Rivers are not merely there to provide us with fish to eat, but they provide the drinking water and a natural drainage system for the rainfall and waste generated by humans, all of which are essential prerequisites of city living.

Yet, these cries have fallen on deaf ears. Industrial effusion has continued to be dumped untreated into major rivers like the Sitalakkhya and the deadly toxins from Hazaribagh have been allowed to enter the Buriganga over years — all thanks to turning a blind eye to the practice by concerned authorities. Realtors have had a field day for years as they have, with impunity, encroached upon rivers and today we are in this terrible situation. This is a matter of life and death and unless steps are taken to enforce laws that exist on paper, Dhaka may soon become an unliveable city.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Food safety and organic farming is a crying need

Already Bangladesh has fulfilled food security needs. Now it is high time to approach food safety. In case of agricultural production, fertiliser, insecticides, antibiotics, growth promoters (used in poultry production), steroid hormones (used in fish and livestock) are used highly above the safety level. It is totally hazardous to health and the environment. Human physiology is drastically affected by the hormones and antibiotics which are used in fish and animal rearing. People want safe food which is produced organically. They like indigenous food and vegetable products. In most developed and developing countries, organic farming and food safety can be practiced.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Fisheries & Livestock should formulate effective policies for organic farming and food safety for people's health and environment.

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1,095 days in waiting



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“I just want to give a hug to my son before my last breath”, moaned the mother of a young BNP activist who was picked up allegedly by members of a high-profile law enforcement agency in December 2013. Father of another victim of disappearance, Adnan Chowdhury, lamented that he would have to go to his grave with the enormous burden of guilt that he handed over his own son to the law enforcers with the firm belief that the latter was innocent and would soon return home. Wife of yet another victim broke into tears narrating that her four-year-old daughter does not want to attend school socials. “All my friends go with their parents, I want my dad to come along with my mum,” she demands.

The above statements were made at a commemoration meeting to mark the third anniversary of enforced disappearance of eight young BNP supporters on December 4, 2013, and twelve more from different parts of Dhaka city during the preceding months. The families claim that they have strong reasons to believe that members of law enforcement agencies (LEAs) picked up their loved ones. When confronted by the families about their identity, members of search parties informed they represented a specific agency and some were in uniforms. In other instances though, persons were in civil clothes the victims were whisked away in clearly marked vehicles.

The affected families gathered not only to share their grief and anguish but also — more importantly — to seek justice and to raise their collective voice to demand the state brings back their loved ones and punishes the perpetrators of the heinous act. They informed the audience that they left no stone unturned to know the whereabouts of the victims. All families reported that soon after the incidents they got in touch with the local police stations, Detective Branch and Rapid Action Battalion offices, local public representatives, senior functionaries of the LEAs, and some even high ups in the administration.

A shared experience of all victim families was the refusal of the LEAs to register complaints (First Information Report). The families also informed that

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The parent of a victim of enforced disappearance at Jatiya Press Club.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

there was palpable indifference of the agencies to investigate. In some instances, instead of helping the families find the disappeared, pressure is exerted on the families to produce the latter. The law enforcers justify such action alleging that there are pending cases against those disappeared activists. In at least one instance, a family member was taken to custody for interrogation to extract information about the location of the disappeared member of the family. In another instance, police came to seize the possession of a victim only to find the victim owned nothing worth.

The uncertainty about the whereabouts of the victims has taken toll on the family members. Life is no longer the same for them. Gaping holes in their hearts has made life of many not worth living. Mothers cannot find words when children ask them when their dads will come back. Elderly parents pass each day wondering if ever they would get to see their lost sons. Relatives and friends gradually distance themselves for fear of coming under the radar of surveillance or retribution.

Over the last three years, at least three members of the 20 victim families met untimely deaths. The families maintain they could no longer bear the agony of the loss. One of most vocal of the campaigners, Mr. Shamsuddin of Dakkhinkhan, suddenly dropped dead. He was in his mid 50s. His hope to see his son alive had faded with time. His last desire was to see his son's final resting place, a wish that remained unfulfilled. Mother of Sajedul Islam Shuman still rushes to the window when she hears clatter of a vehicle in early hours of the morning. She does so with the unending hope that security forces has come to drop back her son whom they had taken away years ago with the promise that he would be back home soon.

The families feel they have hit stonewall in seeking justice. Senior functionaries of LEAs shunned them. The National Human Rights Commission was of no avail. Their appeals to the chief executive of the state did not

yield result. Despite all these, they remain resolute in pursuit of their demand for justice. This, they feel, they owe to the disappeared members of their families. And that's reason for their congregation at the National Press Club on December 4 each year, with photos of their loved ones on their chest and tears in their eyes. They do so to reach out to what they feel is their resort - the collective conscience of the people of Bangladesh who are so proud of the great spirit of liberation war. The victim families remind us that 'right to life' and accessing justice remain integral elements of that spirit.

In his reaction to the claims of 'enforced disappearance', the custodian of law enforcement of the country, the Home Minister, stated that the term 'enforced disappearance' has no place in the lexicon of Bangladesh's law enforcement. The Minister wants the nation to believe that many among the disappeared are opposition political activists hiding from the LEAs. If that were the case does not it fall on the state, and more particularly agencies under him, to find the alleged criminals? Are not the infamous seven murders of Naryanganj an impeccable evidence that enforced disappearance is a reality in Bangladesh? Thanks to River Meghna for refusing to be an abettor of the murders of those who disappeared in Narayanganj. The state has a strong case to answer that if its functionaries are not involved in such gruesome acts what deters them to register the FIRs lodged by the victim families? What bars them from launching investigation?

If the state genuinely holds the view that Bangladesh's LEAs are being accused of engaging in enforced disappearance with malicious intent then what precludes it to pay heed to the demands of the victim families and those of rights activists to institute a credible judicial commission to look into the claims of enforced disappearance?

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Training for gender equality



ARIB ALI AL MANDHARI

For centuries, women around the world have struggled for even the most basic rights. The fight for equality has been an uphill climb — one that is far from over. This is certainly the case in the Middle East, where the challenges women face are typically rooted in social norms, cultural systems, and religious doctrine, and can be enshrined in law.

In some Middle Eastern countries, women may not travel, work, or register to vote without permission from a man in her family. Even if it is not explicitly prohibited, joining the workforce is often very difficult for women, not least because of widespread resistance among the men who dominate these societies. Any woman who has sought to apply for a job knows just how vehement that opposition can be.

The result of these norms and structures is that women in the Middle

East are often subject to discrimination, isolation, and frustration. They are unable to participate freely in their societies or contribute to their countries' economic development.

But the world is changing fast. At a time of ever-deepening interconnectedness, people are more aware than ever of what is possible, and more motivated than ever to seek reforms — whether educational, economic, or political — that improve their lives. So which reforms are needed to advance gender equality?

A central area of focus must be education. First and foremost, schools give girls the knowledge they need to fulfil their potential in the future. But it is also vital to instil in both girls and boys an understanding of the need for social and economic equality, to reflect the fundamental equality of opportunity that all deserve.

Advancing gender equality also requires changes to policies and regulations. Beyond ensuring equal rights under the law, countries should work to boost the representation of women in politics and government. Women need to

know that they can reach positions of genuine authority, even in domains from which they have historically been excluded — and they need encouragement to get there.

The same is true for the economy. Women need opportunities and support to develop and run their own businesses, to innovate, and to become financially independent. This would benefit not only women, but also their families, communities, and the economy as a whole. Even women who do not own or run businesses would have much to offer, if given the chance to enter the workforce and earn their own living.

To this end, training is crucial. Women need access to guidance, workshops, and longer-term training programmes that prepare them to participate in the labour market, while ensuring that they know — and can defend — their rights.

An important initiative that could provide a useful model for such efforts is the Springboard Women's Development Programme, developed by the British Council. The programme aims to give women the confidence and capabilities they need to make a better life for

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themselves, both professionally and personally; to expand their role and influence in public life; and to help support open, stable, and inclusive societies across the Middle East and North Africa.

The key to the programme's success is its focus on empowering women to fulfil their potential. It helps participants explore and develop their abilities, and then apply them in practical settings, such as acquiring funding to start or expand their own businesses. It also prepares women to confront — and overcome — the obstacles they will inevitably face as they gain independence and influence.

Delivered by a network of licensed trainers, the Springboard Women's Development Programme has already been used by over 230,000 women in more than 40 countries. In just four years, the programme has trained more than 700 women in my country, Oman, through the Ministry of Education. And many more women are clamouring to participate.

Achieving gender equality in the Middle East will be a long process, requiring fundamental educational, social, and economic reforms. But giving women the right training now can kick-start the process, enabling half the population finally to reach their potential — to the benefit of all.

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