

Goodbye, Barack Obama

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

ALL good things must come to an end, but some things leave us with a lingering "feelgood" emotion. Such was the Presidency of Barack Obama. His legacy will be judged by history, but, even his critics cannot deny that Obama was a consequential President. As he leaves the White House, we can testify to his many successes: managing a recovery from the recession that he inherited; introducing a universal health care system that provided insurance to millions of Americans; winding down US involvement in foreign wars; combating international terrorism without engaging in religious stereotyping; building a worldwide consensus on environment. All these contributions notwithstanding, President Obama was also a conscientious and intelligent leader who espoused humane values and inspired millions because of the dignity and gravitas with which he conducted his presidency. These qualities seem all the more striking when viewed in contrast to the overbearing, bullish style of his successor.

Obama has received severe criticism on the lapses in his presidency — increased drone attacks, expansive surveillance of American citizens, failure to enact a comprehensive immigration reform and closure of the Guantanamo detention facility. Most importantly, he is held responsible for not dealing effectively with the upheaval in the Middle East, particularly for not preventing the human tragedy in Syria. If Obama was too interventionist for some, he wasn't interventionist enough for his detractors. But

we cannot but admire his landmark achievement in forging an agreement with Iran despite persistent war cries from hawks in the administration. Obama pursued a path of assertive diplomacy over aggression as is demonstrated by his action in ending the five decade old isolationist policy against Cuba.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the Obama presidency has been that he achieved what he did despite strong resistance from a hostile Republican Congress and vicious racist attacks (led by Donald Trump) that questioned his citizenship and legitimacy as president. Yet he conducted himself with tremendous restraint encouraging his supporters to "resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that have poisoned our politics for so long."

At a personal level, while campaigning for

candidate Obama in 2008, I was truly inspired by his message of change. I believed in it because of the glimmer of hope I saw in the eyes of the black boy accompanying his volunteer mother to the campaign office, or in the little white girl who jumped with joy when she saw Barack Obama appear in a rally. My faith in the Obama optimism "yes we can" was reiterated by the men and women who responded to my door to door calls with hope written across their faces. When an elderly white woman opened her door and assured me that she and her husband would vote for the "black guy" I believed that the racist fabric of American society had been replaced by a multicoloured tapestry of tolerance and open-mindedness...

Unfortunately, today, I have been hit by the sad truth that Obama's leadership has

failed to usher in a post-partisan and post-racial America that many of us dreamed of. He leaves behind a divided nation and a successor, whose reckless, insensitive demeanour has raised doubts about his ability to heal the wounds of the most acrimonious election in US history. But, despite the tarnished hopes of a post-racial age and the uncertainty of the continuation of his legacy, in his farewell speech Barack Obama defended his belief that the democratic process can empower citizens to change the course of nations. He urged people to be vigilant, relying, "not in my ability to bring about change — but in yours."

It would be unfair to write a piece on Barack Obama without shedding some light on the "man Obama" who has been voted as America's "most admired" for nine straight

years (Gallup). One cannot help but wonder how Obama continues to maintain a cool, dignified demeanour despite all the unjust, nasty attacks from racists and Republicans. According to a recent article ("Obama's Secret to Surviving the White House Years — Books", NY Times, January 16, 2017) during his tenure in the White House, "books were a sustaining source of ideas and inspiration" for the president, and gave him "the ability to slow down and get perspective". In particular, Shakespearean tragedies played a crucial role in helping him understand "how certain patterns repeat themselves and play themselves out between human beings." Ironically, if we are to follow this line of thinking we may now need to brace ourselves for a Macbethan (or Trumpian) era where ambition, unchecked by moral constraints, leads to destruction and chaos.

But...we may still wake up from this "midwinter nightmare" and discover that all is not lost. Many of us who found comfort in Barack Obama's inclusive approach toward minorities and the underprivileged must continue to believe in his core message of hope. "Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope." (Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention speech, 2004)

As we bid farewell to the first African American president of the United States, let us salute him in humble recognition of the fact that despite the strong headwinds he encountered, he performed his duties with tremendous dignity, unshakable fortitude and remarkable class.

You did us proud.



Barack Obama and members of his family wave goodbye to supporters after Obama's farewell address at McCormick Place in Chicago Illinois, January 10, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank. E-mail: shiftingimages@gmail.com

When our migrant workers are left to die



UPASHANA SALAM

AFTER her employers in Lebanon cancelled her contract, Bangladeshi worker Maksuda Begum was left in a dire state. She had worked for a Lebanese family as a domestic worker for two years, but after they cancelled her contract for no apparent reason, she was forced to remain there as an undocumented worker. Stranded in a foreign country, Maksuda, who had been suffering from serious ailments for the last five months, moved from pillar to post to get the treatment that she needed but to no avail. The 35-year-old lost her life at a hospital in Beirut on January 16.

Maksuda, a garments worker in Bangladesh, had left the country in 2012 in search of a more stable economic life. But after the sudden cancellation of her contract two years later, she had to struggle to make ends meet, as she was forced into the status of an undocumented worker and found it difficult to find work. Things took a drastic turn for the worse when it was found that she had two tumours in her stomach and had also been suffering from kidney complications for several months. Her fellow Bangladeshi migrants in Lebanon alleged that despite repeated efforts to get funding for treatment and other assistance, the Bangladeshi embassy in Lebanon did not handle the matter sincerely or diligently.

When even after three months the embassy failed to treat Maksuda's concerns with the urgency that they required, some fellow migrants extended their support and arranged for her departure to Bangladesh. When members of the organisation requested embassy officials to process her repatriation as soon as possible, they alleged that the officials misbehaved with them.

Despite their sincere efforts, the workers were unable to save Maksuda, as the airport authorities denied her permission to fly because of her

physical condition. She was taken to a local hospital in Beirut afterwards where she breathed her last four days later.

Bangladeshi Ambassador to Lebanon, Abdul Motaleb Sarkar, argues that the allegations of the migrants are false, adding that they tried their best to help Maksuda but as the process of clearance is complex in Lebanon for undocumented foreign workers, it took them time to issue her clearance.

The Bangladeshi ambassador is hopefully right about his assertions that the embassy was there for Maksuda when she needed them the most, despite the claims of several of her compatriots who argued otherwise. However, that doesn't dilute the fact that Bangladeshi migrant workers — the same who send home remittance of around USD 14 billion a year — have time and again complained of demeaning, condescending and non-cooperative attitudes from the embassies and labour wings of the country's foreign missions.

In most cases, officials and staff of the labour wings are unresponsive to their needs, allege migrant workers, despite the fact that the government is spending crores of taka from migrant funds to meet the expenses of these officials and staff ("Migrants get little help", December 19, 2015, *The Daily Star*). They also assert that due to lack of coordination and cooperation from these officials, they have been forced to lose their jobs and even face deportation from the countries they worked in. At a day-long programme organised by the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry in 2015, migrant workers also alleged that instead of helping them in times of crises, labour wing officials sometimes delay in providing services such as issuing passports or travel permits.

Over the years, there have been numerous complaints and allegations of Bangladeshi migrant workers facing abuse and exploitation in the hands of their employers, especially those in the

Middle East, where they are often treated like poorly paid slaves. In December 2016, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) also called upon the Bangladesh government to improve protection for its domestic workers migrating to the Middle East. The reputed international organisation claimed that even though Bangladesh has become "an outlier in Asia for actively seeking employment of domestic workers in the Middle East", the country has failed to protect their rights adequately, whereas other domestic workers' countries of origin such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Nepal have "vocally denounced abuse abroad and increased protections and salary requirements for their migrant workers."

The fact that Maksuda was forced to stay back in Lebanon as an undocumented worker for two years after her termination, even though she went there with all the required papers, testifies to our reluctance to question the intention and legal system of destination countries that accept the labour of our workers but don't hesitate to dump them unceremoniously when their work is no longer required. The situation is especially perilous in Middle Eastern countries like the UAE and Oman, where employers basically confiscate the passports of migrant workers to keep them from leaving. This is further aggravated by the restrictive kafala system practiced in most Middle Eastern countries, which ties the visas of migrant domestic workers to their employers, thereby effectively preventing them from working for a new employer without the permission of current employer, even if they are abusive.

In a report on abuses against migrant domestic workers in Oman, published by Human Rights Watch in July 2016, almost all the Bangladeshi women workers interviewed said that their passports were confiscated by their employers, and that they were not paid their full salaries but were forced to work excessively long hours without days

off, and denied adequate food and living conditions. A female migrant worker narrated a harrowing tale of abuse and exploitation in the hands of almost every party involved in her migration, starting from the recruitment agent to her employer. She detailed how she paid an agent in Bangladesh USD 750 for a job in the UAE but the recruitment agent there "sold" her to a man, who forced her to work 21 hours a day for a family of 15 with no rest or day off, verbally abused and sexually harassed her, and withheld her entire salary. Her passport was obviously confiscated and when she pleaded with her employer to let her leave, he sent her back to the agency in Oman who "beat her that night 50 times with a stick."

Apart from Kuwait, no other Middle Eastern country sets minimum salaries for migrant workers. However, embassies of other countries of origin require employers to agree to monthly minimum salaries; Philippines stresses on the highest minimum salary of USD 400 while Indian embassies in the Gulf require employers to provide USD 3,000 "as a refundable security deposit, which is used to pay for return flight tickets or unpaid salaries when an employer is abusive. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has the lowest minimum wage of USD 200, which is almost never claimed.

The situation is especially risky for female domestic workers who are vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse alongside backbreaking work. Interestingly, most country-of-origin embassies in the Middle East provide shelter to domestic workers when they seek to escape abusive and exploitative

employers, and even offer assistance in filing claims against their employers. There are very few Bangladeshi embassies, on the other hand, which offer shelter, thereby leaving women workers without any refuge to turn to when they are abused.

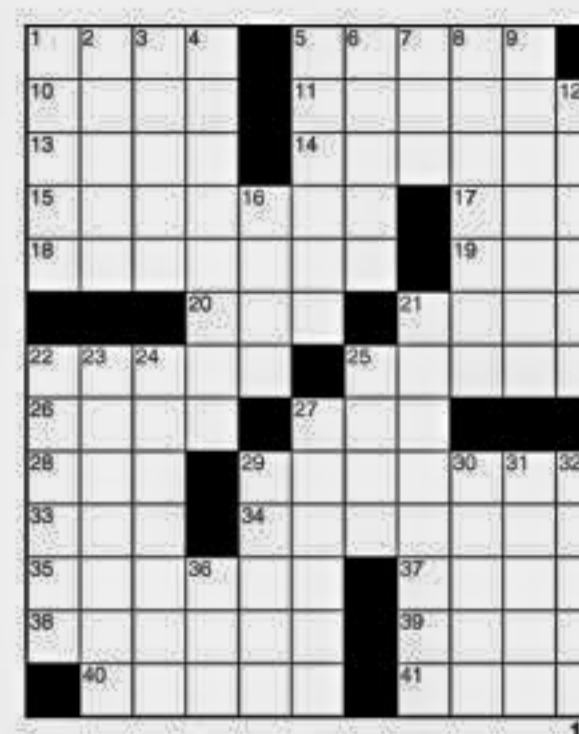
In our pursuit for more remittance, we are putting our workers at risk by setting weak protections and asking for cheaper salaries when compared to several other countries. If we want to ensure that our workers get the respect they truly deserve, we need to offer them the highest protections, which as suggested by the HRW, include increasing monitoring over our recruitment agents, and aiding workers in distress. In order for us to do that, the staff of the labour wings of our foreign missions need to be sensitised and trained on how to approach and behave with migrant workers. Embassies in vulnerable regions with a history of abuse, for example, the Middle East, should set procedures that enable workers to register allegations of abuse, overwork, and denial of pay and proper living standards. These allegations should be further investigated upon the return of the workers. Bangladesh should also ratify the International Labour Organisation Domestic Workers Convention, a treaty that requires countries of origin to "cooperate with other countries to ensure protection migrant domestic workers," which has been ratified by 23 other countries. If we want others to stop taking our migrant workers for granted, we should first stop taking them for granted. It's only when we stop exploiting them that others will follow the lead.

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team, *The Daily Star*.

In our pursuit for more remittance, we are putting our workers at risk by setting weak protections and asking for cheaper salaries when compared to several other countries.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 LummoX
 - 5 Geometry class challenge
 - 10 Green fruit
 - 11 Use for support
 - 13 Pub brews
 - 14 Turkey's capital
 - 15 Beauty contest
 - 17 Decimal base
 - 18 Kerchiefs
 - 19 Have dinner
 - 20 Young one
 - 21 Be bold
 - 22 Squad car sound
 - 25 Robin snacks
 - 26 Like some wines
 - 27 Sty resident
 - 28 Geman conjunction
 - 29 Summoned
 - 33 Rollaway bed
 - 34 Headline spot
 - 35 Pencil end
 - 37 Out of the wind
 - 38 Undo, as a law
 - 39 Intellect
- DOWN**
- 1 Applauds
 - 2 Purple hue
 - 3 Last Greek letter
 - 4 Abandoned
 - 5 Mars or Mercury
 - 6 Takes a flat
 - 7 Sturdy tree
 - 8 Running wild
 - 9 Ulna's place
 - 12 City on the Loire
 - 16 Stratford's river
 - 21 Iditarod crews
 - 22 Cup holder
 - 23 Paid no attention to
 - 24 Bureaucratic nuisance
 - 25 Plane part
 - 27 Jewelry buy
 - 29 Javelin
 - 30 Book's page number
 - 31 Without stop
 - 32 Oboe parts
 - 36 Galleon setting



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

MOTELS ORES
 IBERIA DELS
 CARROT OVER
 AMMAN PRIMA
 HAST LESSEN
 ISEE END
 JACKFROST
 BANITSY
 ENTITY SCAB
 REINS STALL
 EDGE WENTIE
 TOUR ARRIVE
 SEAT RESTED

QUOTABLE Quote

JOHN STUART MILL
 ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER, POLITICAL ECONOMIST AND CIVIL SERVANT

A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.

NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY
 The only Bangladeshi university where all teachers have foreign Master's or PhD degrees primarily from USA, Canada, UK and Australia

Enhance your English, Empower Yourself

Certificate in English Proficiency (CEP)

Department of English and Modern Languages
 Spring 2017

The CEP is a recognized certificate course for improving your proficiency in English. The program focuses on productive and receptive skills, i.e. speaking, writing, reading, and listening, as well as the improvement of vocabulary and grammar. It also emphasizes the development of business and professional English.

Certificates are awarded upon satisfactory completion of the course.

Course Fee Tk. 7000 only **Course begins: 3 February, 2017**
 Duration of course: 3 months
 Class days: Fridays
 Class time: 9am-12 noon (CEP)

The CEP course is taught by highly qualified and experienced instructors.

For information, please contact:
 Department of English and Modern Languages
 Room: NAC 957, Level 09
 Bashundhara, Dhaka-1229
 E-mail: tanjia.azmeen@northsouth.edu
 Tel: + 88-02-55668200 Ext: 2021

www.northsouth.edu