

Starving for food Relief should have been planned ahead

THAT the flood affected regions of the haor areas would be wiping out food resources for thousands of people was a well known fact. This isn't the first time it has happened in Bangladesh. Yet, we find that for residents of many upazilas including Bishwambarpur, entire families have to travel inordinate distances to get to Open Market Sale (OMS) points only to find that supplies finished before they arrived. Points selling OMS rice and flour have not been adequately stocked for the relief operations that come when floods wipe out normal food stocks of communities and we are at a loss to understand why the concerned ministry did not take steps as the flood was unfolding over the last few weeks.

Only now when these flashfloods have literally wiped out the Boro paddy over thousands of hectares of land, and rice and flour cannot be found in many areas are authorities waking up to ground realities. Although the OMS operation began on April 9, it failed to take into account how many ultra poor families were affected in the region where the flooding has effectively disrupted the supply chain of essential food supplies. Disturbingly enough, allegations have arisen that graft is also involved where some unscrupulous agents are selling off OMS rice to local restaurants, which is simply aggravating an already strained food supply.

We urge authorities, particularly the food ministry, to make provisions for food essentials well in advance of any natural calamity such as floods, particularly in light of the fact that floods are a common disaster in our country. For now, relief, especially food to those in flood-hit haor areas, must be expedited on an emergency basis.

French presidential election

Signs of hope

WE, along with the rest of the world, have heaved a sigh of relief after the outcome of the first round of the French presidential election. The victory of Emmanuel Macron, who founded his political party only a year ago, will face ultra-right wing Marine Le Pen in the final run-off. The results of the first round show some signs of hope as Le Pen and her party's demagoguery, anti-immigrant populism and Islamophobia have been rejected by the voters.

Having said that, the election has exposed some deep divisions in the French polity. With unemployment figure hovering at the double digit and the rising tide of ultra-nationalism making its wave felt at the Côte d'Azur, no established political party has done well in the polls. So much so that, for the first time since the establishment of the Fifth republic, the second presidential run-off is going to be without the candidates of any traditional political party. This reflects how disillusioned the ordinary people have become with the political establishment, a trend we have seen repeating itself in the elections across the western hemisphere.

However, we remain hopeful of Macron's message of positive politics that includes diversity and open borders. The future of French's membership of the European Union (EU) and the question of the latter's survival as a political entity hinge upon the balance as Le Pen wants to emulate the Brexit model to leave the EU. However, there are reasons to feel optimistic about, as the opinion polls predict, a resounding victory for Macron. Also, we believe that, during the final round of polls on May 7, the French will lean favourably on the great ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* of the French Revolution that heralded the birth of liberal democracies around the world.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A suggestion for the DMP

My blue book was once seized by a traffic officer. Six months later, I was told that my document had been misplaced. It was a huge hassle for me to have another blue book prepared.

I would like to suggest that the DMP, instead of seizing the document, should scan the document on a device which has apps to scan documents. Also, traffic police carry machines which produce fine tickets. If credit cards could be swiped on these machines, payments could be made instantly, which would reduce a lot of hassle. I hope the DMP will consider these suggestions seriously and use the available modern technology to make things easier for themselves and us.

Aminur Rahim, Mohakhali

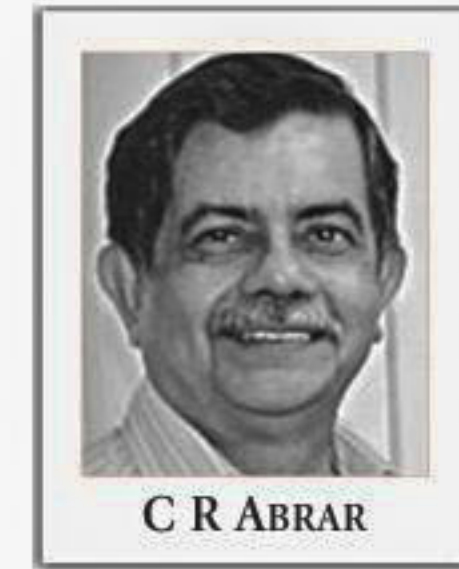
Alternative employment facilities in haor region

The two main means of surviving in the haor regions are growing Boro paddy in the dry season and catching fish in the wet season. This year all their paddy fields have flooded with hilly surge; the fish are dying, and there is no food to feed the cattle. Besides providing relief assistance, private entrepreneurs and the government should create alternative employment opportunities for those living in the area, who remain idle during the rainy season anyway, except for when they are fishing. They could be provided with work through small and cottage industries, such as making utensils or handicraft items from bamboo and cane, embroidery quilts, and other natural materials. Such opportunities could save them from completely starving in the aftermath of a disaster in their region.

Samaresh Das, Bakshibazar

THE DEATH OF ROMEL CHAKMA

Custodial death: some key questions



C R ABRAR

ON Friday, the news of the death of Romel Chakma at the hands of security forces spread like wildfire in social media. The subsequent reports surrounding his detention, death and cremation are puzzling, to say the least.

It all began when a contingent of army personnel picked up Romel Chakma, a student of Naniarchar College in Rangamati and general secretary of Pahari Chhatra Parishad's Rangamati unit, in the morning of April 5 from Naniarchar Bazar area. Subsequently, the director of Inter Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR) stated that Romel was detained in connection with two cases filed over torching a truck and looting two buses. The ISPR went on to claim that the detainee was handed over to the police the same day and died on April 19 at Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) where he was undergoing treatment.

Within a day after Romel's arrest, his father, Kanti Chakma, sought the intervention of the National Human Rights Commission. He informed the Commission about the detention of his son, expressed concern that he (Romel) was critically injured due to torture inflicted on him in detention. He also said his son fell unconscious at the beating of the security force personnel, who later tried to hand him over to the police. But the police refused to accept his unconscious body.

It is revealing that on a query from a leading English daily, the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Naniarchar Police Station denied receiving Romel from any quarter. The OC, however, said, "We have information that Romel was admitted to Naniarchar Health Complex after he was injured in a road accident. Documents at the facility also show that he was referred to Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH)."

News reports further inform that Romel's family members, wishing anonymity, said that when they went to take his body from the army on April 21, they were told that the body had already been cremated. In a text message the ISPR director informed that the cremation took place between 1:30pm and 4:00pm in presence of Naniarchar OC and Upazila Nirbahi Officer of Kawkhali. Contradicting such a claim, the OC told the media he was not present at the cremation. When the ISPR official was asked if the family was present during the last rites, the official said, "I'd have to check. My common sense tells me that it's only natural that the family members were there."

The Romel case raises some important questions for the authorities. Firstly, Romel was not a fugitive and was an examinee of the ongoing intermediate examinations. Even if the two charges against Romel



SOURCE: PINTEREST

were true, does the responsibility of arresting him fall on a security force other than the police – now that the much-celebrated peace deal has long been in effect? Secondly, was Romel or his family furnished with any warrant of arrest? Thirdly, if the army had indeed handed over Romel to the police (a claim that the police denies) isn't there any protocol in place for documentation for such a handover? If it does exist, then where is the evidence of the handover? Fourthly, why was he not produced before the court within the stipulated 24-hour period? Fifthly, why was the detainee's family denied access for more than two weeks? Sixthly, what action did the National Human Rights Commission take after receiving the complaint of Kanti Chakma within a day after Romel's detention? Seventhly, in what state and from which authority did the CMCH receive Romel's injured body, what did the marks of injury on his body indicate, what does the autopsy result inform, whom did they hand over the body to after his death and what measures have they

taken to preserve documents related to Romel? Eighthly, why has the family been denied the body of Romel to conduct the last rites? Ninthly, under which authority did the concerned security force conduct cremation?

Romel Chakma's death has drawn the nation's attention to the gruesome practice of torture inflicted on detainees by the members of law enforcement agencies. The episode also lays bare the reality of the lack of accountability in matters of custodial torture and deaths. It's time for the political leadership and those at the helm of national security and law enforcement establishments to bring to book those members of the security forces who go beyond their mandated tasks. Not doing so will erode people's confidence in those agencies.

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Circle of Trust



RUBANA HUQ

VERY often, we walk away from our losses and just expect to recover. Well, we don't. Memories last forever, especially if they are torturous in nature and form. The best way is to work around the pain and address it the way we ought to. The tragedy of April 24, 2013 cannot be shoved aside in oblivion. For a long time, this date will continue to haunt us all in the forms of reports, op-eds, protests, seminars, television coverage, et al. Even if it does not get covered anywhere, grief will still be around. The scar, the damage, the hurt can only be addressed with a fresh commitment to turn things around. In fact, the tragedy of 2013 is best dealt with positive, transformative energy, to ensure that the death of more than 1,100 workers was not in vain.

How have we evolved? Aside from strengthening our buildings, fire and electrical safety, have we all learnt a far bigger lesson? What lesson have we learnt?

Many say that lack of collective bargaining led to the collapse of Rana Plaza. (I have a slightly different view. I often say that the industry needs to be represented through workers voicing their concerns through "collective expression." Somehow, the mere mention of "bargaining" prompts most of the industry owners to be defensive.) If there were elected leaders in the factories, would they have lived? Would they be able to negotiate their demands of abstinence from work on grounds of safety? Perhaps.

If so, does this tragedy teach us the need to listen to our workers more? Yes, it does. If so, does April 24 compel us to allow workers' voices to be heard in a more constructive manner? Yes, it does. Most unfortunately, the trust deficit between the trade union leaders and the owners has widened even more in the last couple of years and hence, in spite of the number of trade unions increasing, most owners are averse to formation of unions. For most of us, even an elected Workers' Welfare Association (WWA) or an elected Workers' Participatory Committee (WPC) is more acceptable and functioning. Fact is, WWA or WPC does the same thing as a trade union and no less. Yet, we shudder at the thought of trade unionists. The very mention of trade unions evokes images of illegal strikes, property damages, unlawful provocation of the workers, innumerable

cases being filed against the owner, etc. Reality is, most of the trade union leaders legally have affiliations abroad. Therefore, perception of the trade union leaders directly writing letters to international organisations and brands instead of solving cases locally is common. In all fairness, neither the owner, nor the workers have a functional bridge between them. And even the little communication also goes bust when trade unionists are seen narrating workplace woes to our friends abroad instead of sitting directly with the production units. Even before we sense or know a particular problem within our own factories, workers' complaints reach international offices and get covered in world renowned dailies that routinely cover workplace abuse and malpractice.

complaining about having spent too much money on remediation and relocation, and yet still having to face the demands of trade unions or workers' representatives. The demand of revision of minimum wage has again cropped up; the new speculations of EU and ILO of punishing Bangladesh for unfair labour practices is crippling the RMG industry with fears and the uncertainty of global consumerism has also added to the existing woes of most manufacturers. Our lives seem to be depending on Macron being elected in France, on Brexit somehow not being triggered, on even Trump favouring us over China or India. With so many national and international fears, and the fall in exports, the RMG industry is limping towards expansion.

4. If the owners are reluctant to sit for a dialogue, it is because they genuinely believe that in the absence of external mediation, they function better with our workers.

How do we then go forward? Again, the answer is simple. Both workers and owners must believe that the only way to sustainable business is to champion the right cause. The cause of the workers is one worth fighting for. The cause of the owners of sustaining their businesses, while supporting better labour practices, is also a valid one. If trade unions are to work in this sector, trade unionists must understand that their organisations will have to beat all odds and become shining examples of good industrial relations (instead of trade union formations forcing businesses to shut



The wall shows pictures of missing workers of the Rana Plaza collapse.

PHOTO: STAR

As a result, brands fearing bad press and negative exposure reduce or withdraw business and very soon after, the factory faces closure.

But, the fear of closure has now sunk in. Workers and trade unionists now know that factory closure cannot be the answer. Therefore, the discourse has now changed a bit. The recent demands include continuation of business from the brands and retailers so that the workers' livelihood is ensured. At the same time, bitterness has set in. Four years down the line, post-Rana Plaza, the labour leaders are still complaining about owners being reluctant about formation of trade unions. And the owners, at their end, are being defensive about having done enough in terms of structural, fire and electrical integrity. At the same time, most of us are also

How do we dispel fears of the owners and the workers' representatives? How do we truly examine both sides of the coin and reconcile with better understanding and empathy? The task is not too difficult, I believe. A couple of realisations need to set in:

1. If the trade union leaders are taking a hard position, it is because they have struggled too hard for too long. Suffering has led to hardening.
2. If the owners are talking tough, it is because they have often suffered surprise setbacks from trade unionists and cannot afford to have any disruption anymore.
3. If the trade union leaders are writing to international brands and retailers about issues and complaints instead of talking to the owners directly, it is because they believe that this is the fastest way to achieve results.

so that no factory ever shuns the idea of collective expression or bargaining. If owners are to invest more in labour, then workers also need to be told to trust the hands that feed them. At the end, the ship must be responsibly steered through stormy seas and brought ashore. Both parties need to engage with trust through dialogue. The tragedy of Rana Plaza has taught us all a lesson that we cannot afford to ignore or unlearn: reconciliation cannot be in the form of short doses of steroids, attempting to mask real pain. Real pain and real wounds require engagement of all stakeholders with complete understanding, patience and faith. Now is the time to realise that there is no alternative to a circle of trust and there is no alternative to freedom.

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