LOCKED UP IN MOTHERLAND

A veteran US-Bangladeshi doctor spends more than three months in Bangladeshi jail without any conviction

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Dr Syed Shamsuddin Ahmed, former professor and head of Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), has been languishing in prison since February 28, 2017. The crime of this expat doctor, who is now a US citizen, was that he wanted to treat the least privileged people of the remote areas of Bangladesh. However, being allegedly deceived by his partner, this sexagenarian man who is also a diabetic and cardiac patient, is going through the indescribable sufferings of incarcerated life.

During one of his free surgeries for cleft lip and palate patients.

PHOTOS: COURTESY

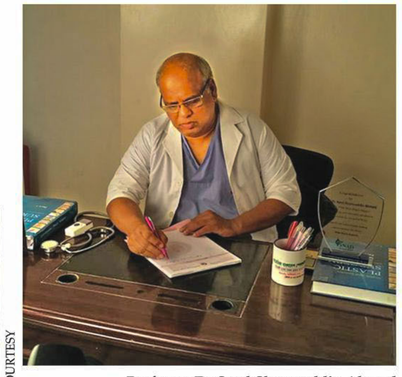
It all began in 2014 when Jahangir Selim, a businessman from Dinajpur met Dr Ahmed as a patient. He developed a cordial relationship with the simple-minded Ahmed and convinced the latter to set up a hospital in Birampur Upazila of Dinajpur district in one of his (Selim's) buildings. Upon agreement, Dr Ahmed supplied medical equipment worth of Tk 3, 39, 27,120 to Selim to set up the hospital in September 2014 (according to the complaint petition of the case no: 737/15).

When Selim did not allow Dr Ahmed to start treatment in the hospital even in March of 2015, he became suspicious. Upon realising that he had actually fallen in the trap of Selim—who had actually seized all the valuable medical equipment and sold many of those by that time—Dr Ahmed filed a case (case no: 737/15, section 420/406) at Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Court on April 5, 2015. The court summoned Selim; his bail petition was refused and he was sent to jail. However, on April 21, 2015, Selim was granted bail on the condition that he would resolve all the issues with Dr Ahmed and that was the beginning of the doctor's misfortune.

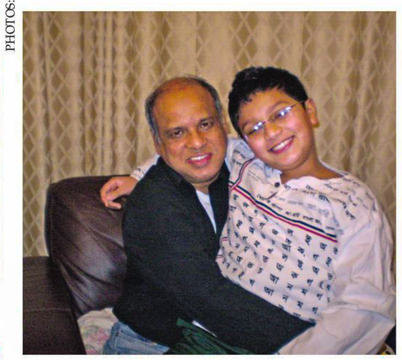
Instead of resolving the issues, Selim filed a case against Dr Ahmed (case no: 107/16, section 420/406) claiming that Dr Ahmed had borrowed Tk 30,00,000 from Selim on April 17, 2014, which he did not return it in time. Consequently, Dr Ahmed was summoned by a Dinajpur court and sent to jail. However, soon it was proved that Selim's claim of borrowing Tk 30, 00,000 was false. The Treasury Branch of the District Commissioner's office of Dinajpur certified that the three stamp papers, each worth Tk 100 that Selim submitted as the deed to borrow the money, was supplied to the stamp vendor by the Treasury office only on November 22, 2016. So, it was impossible for Dr Ahmed to sign those stamp papers back in 2014. As a consequence, the Dinajpur court granted Dr Ahmed's appeal for bail on March 2, 2017.

However, Dr Ahmed's ordeal did not end there. When he was about to be released on bail, the jail authority informed him that a production warrant had been issued against him by the Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, as a person named Abdul Oresh Parvez filed a case (case no: CR 60(A)/17) against him claiming that Dr Ahmed took Tk 15, 00,000 from Abdul to send him to the USA. So, Dr Ahmed was transferred to Keraniganj Central Jail. In the next few days, five more cases were filed against Dr Ahmed on similar allegations in the courts of Dhaka, Gopalganj, Thakurgaon and Dinajpur. However, in most of these cases, when the court summoned the plaintiff to submit the original copy of the deed, nobody turned up. And, in one particular case, where an individual called Helal Mia alleged that Dr Ahmed took Tk 12, 00,000 from him for sending him to the USA, Helal himself admitted that he was forced by Selim to file the case as he used to work for Selim. Helal finally withdrew the case as stated in the report submitted by the Police Bureau of Investigation.

When Selim was asked about this case and the forged documents, he first threatened this reporter not to proceed with the report. He also introduced himself as a special correspondent of ATN Bangla, which upon investigation proved false, and repeatedly requested that no report be filed by *The Daily Star*. He also argued,



Professor Dr Syed Shamsuddin Ahmed



Dr Ahmed with his youngest son.

"As an aggrieved person I have the right to file cases and what you are talking about is absolutely false. I will speak before the court and I am confident that I will get justice."

A total of seven cases were filed against Dr Ahmed and as none of the plaintiffs appeared before the court, Dr Ahmed was either granted bail or the case was dismissed. However, due to these cases, a veteran physician like Dr Ahmed has spent more than three months in two different prisons of Bangladesh without any conviction. Although the bail order has already been issued by the High Court, due to bureaucratic complexities, Dr Ahmed has still not been released at the time of writing this report. As his health condition has deteriorated, he has been transferred to the prison ward of DMCH.

Dr Ahmed started his career as an assistant surgeon at DMCH in 1981. He was one of the first surgeons of the Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit of DMCH and was later promoted to the head of that unit. At Bangladesh America Specialised Hospital in Dhaka, he used to conduct free surgery for poor patients. Professor Dr Samanta Lal Sen, a colleague of Dr Ahmed and also a former head of Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit says, "I have worked with Ahmed for a long time; from 1982 till his retirement probably in 2010. He is a very sincere, professional and efficient physician. It is very unfortunate that an experienced physician like him has been taken to custody without proved conviction."

Dr Ahmed's ordeal reveals a dark side of our legal framework that allows incarceration of a person without any conviction. However, we can only hope that in the end Dr Ahmed will get justice and compensation so that he can continue his humanitarian work in Bangladesh.

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IS THE POLYTHENE BAN AN EYE-WASH?

NILIMA JAHAN

Fifteen years after the polythene bag ban, poly bags are still ruling our markets. But who are producing and distributing these non-biodegradable bags? How powerful are they? How is it that, despite a ban, they are conducting their business hoodwinking the authorities?

Different areas of Old Dhaka, especially—Chawkbazar, Lalbagh, Chadni Ghat, Shahid Nagar, Islambagh, Swari Ghat, South Keraniganj and Kamrangirchar upazila—are regarded as the hub of the packaging, especially polythene, business. Patronised and regulated by the local packaging manufacturers' association, these corrupt businessmen are located in the over-populated parts of the city and supply their products throughout different districts of the country. Currently, with Ramadan knocking at the door and with the High Court restriction on mobile courts, these illegal vendors are conducting their business at a rapid pace.

Talking to local polythene vendors, *The Star Weekend* found that just the Chawkbazar area of Old Dhaka houses nearly 30 polythene factories, most of which operate in one-story buildings, half-built houses or makeshift structures. Many of them also have wholesale shops at Chawkbazaar, which are managed by their own men.

Most of the time, polythene is recycled from used poly bags, collected by rag-pickers. They are then disintegrated and made into a paste to be turned into new products for further use. This entire process can be completed using two or three machines. Since the whole process needs very little investment and a factory can produce a huge amount of products with six to ten employees, the business has become a very lucrative one.

The locals name Riaz Store, Kayes Packaging Store, Shah Jahan Packaging store, Liton Packaging Store, among others, which produce banned polythene shopping bags, and conduct their businesses in open without any fear. Many of the factories don't have a name, as they don't any license for operation. One might find these factories locked from the outside, but in reality, poly bags are being produced inside.

According to Mainul Hasan, who supplies poly bags to different vegetable markets of the city through his shop at Chawkbazaar, the factory owners basically take illegal utility connections from DESCO, WASA and Titas gas, with a very minimal fee. "Also, it is an open secret that if you provide some monthly allowance to the *'elakar boro bhai'* (locally influential political leaders) and police stations, no one will disturb you. But if you dodge them, you cannot survive here," informs Mainul.

Mainul also claims that if anyone comes to the attention of the police while transporting the purchased polythene from the factories to the wholesale shops, as little as Tk. 200 helps them escape. The regular businessmen sometimes don't even need to pay, as they have formed very "intimate relationships" with the local police, he says.

However, when asked about the matter, Shamimur Rashid Talukdar, the officer-in-charge of Chawkbazaar Police Station, denies the allegations of bribery. "It is true that polythene factories exist violating the law, but we do take action against them sometimes, based on complaints," says Talukder. "The main authority responsible, however, is the Department of Environment (DoE) and we assist them with our forces, while conducting the raids," he adds.

RAB Executive Magistrate Sarwoer Alam informs that they have sealed and fined only eight large factories in the last two years—which is a very small number in proportion to the number of factories which operate in the country.

When contacted, the Director of Monitoring and Enforcement, of the DoE, Abu Hena Morshed Zaman informs that they have conducted 114 raids in the last two months, where 214 individuals/companies were fined Tk. 32,64,000, and 31.065 tonnes of polythene shopping bags were seized from different markets, warehouses and factories.

"Apart from the mobile courts, if we need to conduct a raid through general enforcement, we need to make requisition first for the law and order forces, since conducting a raid in Old Dhaka requires a strong security detail. Whenever we get the forces, we try our best with our limited capacities," states Zaman. The limited capacity he speaks of consists of one deputy director, two assistant directors and one inspector. He also mentions that only enforcement is not enough to stop polythene usage; rather awareness should be created to stop the use of polythene.

These illegal vendors are so powerful that last November, when Shakil Hasan, a senior reporter of Jamuna Television, tried to enter into a factory, the factory owners beat him up severely, flaunting the name of the ruling party and poured kerosene all over his body threatening to set him on fire. Though he finally escaped with the help of the local people, and was able to file a case against them, the police could not arrest the three main accused. They even managed to get bail from court.

According to Mirza Azam, State Minister for Jute and Textile, the Ministry, too, has started working to stop the production of illegal poly bags from May 15, but are facing difficulties due to the recent restriction on mobile courts. Also, terming the DoE's bureaucracy as 'very slow', he informs that the packaging companies get license on condition of exporting their products.

"As per their contract, they are also supposed to provide monthly reports on the amount of raw materials imported, the monthly production quantity and export related things," says Azam. "However, it is sad that the companies don't submit any such reports to their respective authorities, nor does the authority do any monitoring. As such, the legal companies are violating the rules by selling these products to the local markets, while the illegal companies are operating with full liberty," he states.

To verify that these companies are indeed doing business locally, *The Star Weekend* contacted a polythene factory under the pretext of purchasing 4,500 kilograms of poly bags. Riazul Islam, the owner of Riaz Packaging Store of Chawk Bazaar, inform this reporter that he had almost all sizes of polythene in his shop. "You can come or send someone or tell me your required sizes; my staff will manage accordingly," says Riaz. "Or if you need one particular size, but comparatively larger amount, you need to place order for that, since we need some time to produce," he explains.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Save the Environment Movement Chairmen, Abu Naser Khan, also notes that the DoE should be more organised while implementing their own laws regarding polythene. At the same time, he says, if we cannot publicise alternative environment-friendly shopping bags and raise awareness, it will be hard to uproot them eventually.

If only the poly bags manufacturers were at fault here, it wouldn't take 15 years for the ban to be implemented. Unfortunately, since powerful quarters and even the enforcement authorities have overtly or covertly support to the manufacturers over the years, the polythene industry has turned into a crime syndicate. If this syndicate continues to remain beyond reach, the polythene ban will remain an eye-wash. ■