

# The Disappeared

KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

THE legal term may be clunky—"enforced disappearance"—but the human story is simple: People literally disappear, from their loved ones and their community, when state officials (or someone acting with state consent) grab them from the street or from their homes and then deny it, or refuse to say where they are. It is a crime under international law.

Thus reads the introductory paragraph on Amnesty International's (AI) webpage on "Disappearances".

On November 7, Mubashar Hasan Caesar, an assistant professor at the department of political science and sociology at North South University in Dhaka, left home for work in the morning, followed by a meeting in the afternoon. He hasn't returned since. With his disappearance, his research on politics and religion and anti-radicalisation has stopped. His classes have come to a standstill. His blog has become inactive. His family and loved ones live in limbo.

Also on the AI website:

Often people are never released and their fate remains unknown. Victims are frequently tortured and are in constant fear of being killed. They know their families have no idea where they are and the chances are no one is coming to help. Even if they escape death and are eventually released, the physical and psychological scars stay with them.

Mubashar Hasan Caesar is the ninth person in Bangladesh to have been reported missing since August. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 524 people have allegedly become victims of enforced disappearance since 2010. Of them, 334 are still missing. Fifty people were allegedly abducted between January and September 2017 alone. As the Inspector General of Police has said in a recent



Mubashar Hasan

statement, enforced disappearances are "nothing new" and have been taking place since ancient times. Indeed.

According to Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, an enforced disappearance is where "a person is arrested, detained, abducted or otherwise deprived of their liberty by agents of the state, or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorisation, support, or acquiescence of the state". This is followed by "a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which places them outside the protection of the law." Forced disappearances became a global concern after hundreds of thousands of people were made to disappear during the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1970s and

1980s as a means of thwarting political opposition.

According to Amnesty International, every disappearance violates a range of human rights including the right to security and dignity of a person; right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; right to humane conditions of detention; right to a legal personality; right to a fair trial; right to a family life; right to life (if the disappeared person is killed or their fate is unknown).

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance came into effect in 2010. It aims to prevent enforced disappearances, uncover the truth when they do happen, and make sure survivors and victims' families receive justice and reparation.

Governments are responsible for

investigating and prosecuting those responsible in a fair trial, legislating to make the International Convention national law, implementing the International Convention and accepting the competency of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, living up to their obligations under international law, making sure survivors and people who have lost their loved ones receive reparation—this includes compensation, rehabilitation, restitution and a guarantee that it won't happen again.

Also on the Amnesty International website it says that:

"Enforced disappearance is frequently used as a strategy to spread terror within society. The feeling of insecurity and fear it generates is not limited to the close relatives of the disappeared, but also affects communities and society as a whole."

There is no conclusive evidence to show that the state is responsible for the disappearances of hundreds of people in Bangladesh in the last seven years. Neither is there evidence to show that the state has done enough to bring them back. Not only do hundreds of people remain missing, but those who have come back have said nothing about the time they were gone. Whether or not the state intends it, its citizens live in constant fear.

Meanwhile, the statistics, the names, the stories, continue to pile up, an almost "normalisation" of the crimes taking place—anyone, doing anything, might disappear. Until one day, until this time, it is one of our own. An academic, a journalist, an activist, a businessperson, a politician, a father-brother-son, a friend.

Caesar is my friend. I didn't know him when he was two years my senior at university. We became friends in England-Scotland when we were both doing our Masters. For almost a year, not a day went by that I didn't talk to

him. We would Skype for hours on end, talking about everything, including our dreams for ourselves and our country. He would give me feedback on my dissertation and email me files with his favourite songs. He would introduce me to thought-provoking films and his ever-widening circle of friends; ask for help setting up a Facebook page for the department of which we were both alums; or initiate fund-raising for a current student in need. He would send me funny videos or pick out specific lines from my feature stories and tell me why he loved them. I still remember a line I had written—"History unfolds in front of my eyes as I turn the pages with dirty fingers"—referring to the dusty and fragile newspaper

archives of 1972. He called me from the UK just to talk about that one line. Who knew then that eight years later, I would be writing about him in the newspaper... Over the years, we were in touch less frequently. He would write for my publication, I would check on him to see how his PhD was going, and he would check on mine. My last messages to him last year were congratulatory, for the academic success he was seeing. I said he had almost become a celebrity! He said jokingly that he was making the best of it while I was still away.

I'm here now, and I'd rather he was here too. Both of us free from fear, our rights intact, safe in our homes, with our parents, our sisters, our daughters. Free to speak, free to write, free to stand up for what we believe in, free to challenge and be challenged. Only then would it be fair. How does one, be it a friend, an enemy, or the state, challenge someone who isn't even there? How does one deal with the disappeared?

Kajalie Shehreen Islam is Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

But again, I am polite. I email back, and no, I just press "reply", and not the "reply all" button, and courteously ask the gentleman with a caravan of degrees to kindly take me off his mailing list.

I then get another response, with thankfully a brand new subject header (as opposed to our usual practice of picking an old email with the subject "Wedding" while the email contains the news of getting a flat tire), interestingly though, starting with "my pleasure". That's right, all small letters. The email is auto-generated, thanking me (profusely) for my "inquiry" and that "he" will respond to me as soon as possible.

Of course, I never get a subsequent "response". I decide to call the learned manager. He answers and then I give him my advice (it's free) about at least putting the emails in the "Bcc" section, for the sake of privacy. He goes ballistic and goes on a tirade.

"I was a lecturer at [...] University for seven years... this is called marketing, in case you don't know!" (Well, it's actually called spamming.) "I object to what you are saying... I have no time to talk to you!"

And he hangs up.

Wow. And he is the sales/marketing manager? I guess, I, the (potential) customer, am not necessarily always right.

Why blame him? We have to pay to pay our bills. We have to pay to pay our dues. We have to pay to pay our respects. We have to pay to pay to be right. We have to pay to be a grateful customer to earn the privilege of being served, or should I say, to be doled out UN relief items.

But remember, when a product or service becomes a commodity, the only differentiator is the service quality. And this spammer is from a dying industry—he is a sales manager at a dime-a-dozen travel agency.

So long, dinosaur...

## So Long, Dinosaur...



further trees. They call you, and, for some reason, the telemarketers all have the same, high-pitched voice.

I am polite, but assertive: "No thank you, I'm not interested in your travel club membership. By the way, where did you get my number from?"

"Sir, from..."—that few, the proud, the elite member directories that have "somehow" made it to the call centre.

Aha! I knew there was a need for "member" directories—to CREATE "members". I usually follow up with a polite email to the president of the club/association as to how/why a directory ends up at this

totally unrelated place. Of course, I get no response, as the email is checked by the PS to the PS of the president. Sometimes I call the president directly and I get the standard answer, "Oh, these things happen. Hey, even I get these calls..."

Now comes the fun part: the spam emails. First of all, it's from a Gmail account while the company has a website, i.e. its own domain. And let's not even get to the structure, syntax, grammar and context of the email.

So, I get this email, with the whole member directly in the "To" field. Really? You're now exposing a thousand people's email addresses to potentially a hundred new

spams? And the sender's "signature" section is five times longer than the mailing list, listing all his degrees, including "IT Singapore". Wow! I'm impressed—a *phoren* degree (certificate from a week-long course).

And then, a few respond by "TAKE ME OFF THE LIST!" But when we yell, we like to "create a scene", like when at a wedding we are served a cold chicken roast, just to show the prowess of our vocal chords and illustrious vocabulary. When responding to the email, we click the "reply all" button to show everyone our wrath.

Second chance to collect your own customised spam list!

Naveed Mahbub is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's *The Naveed Mahbub Show* and ABC Radio's *Good Morning Bangladesh*, and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. Email: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

## QUOTABLE Quote



LEONARDO DA VINCI

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE POLYMATH

Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

## ACROSS

- 34 Golfer Norman
- 35 S&L offering
- 38 Punctual
- 41 Sky sightings
- 42 "Settle down!"
- 43 Word on an octagon
- 44 Rover's rewards
- 45 Inquires
- 29 Allow
- 30 Fall behind
- 33 Comes together
- 34 River of Arizona
- 36 Chess castle
- 37 Nile reptiles
- 38 Fall mo.
- 39 Neither follower
- 40 Sock part
- 41 Mex. neighbor

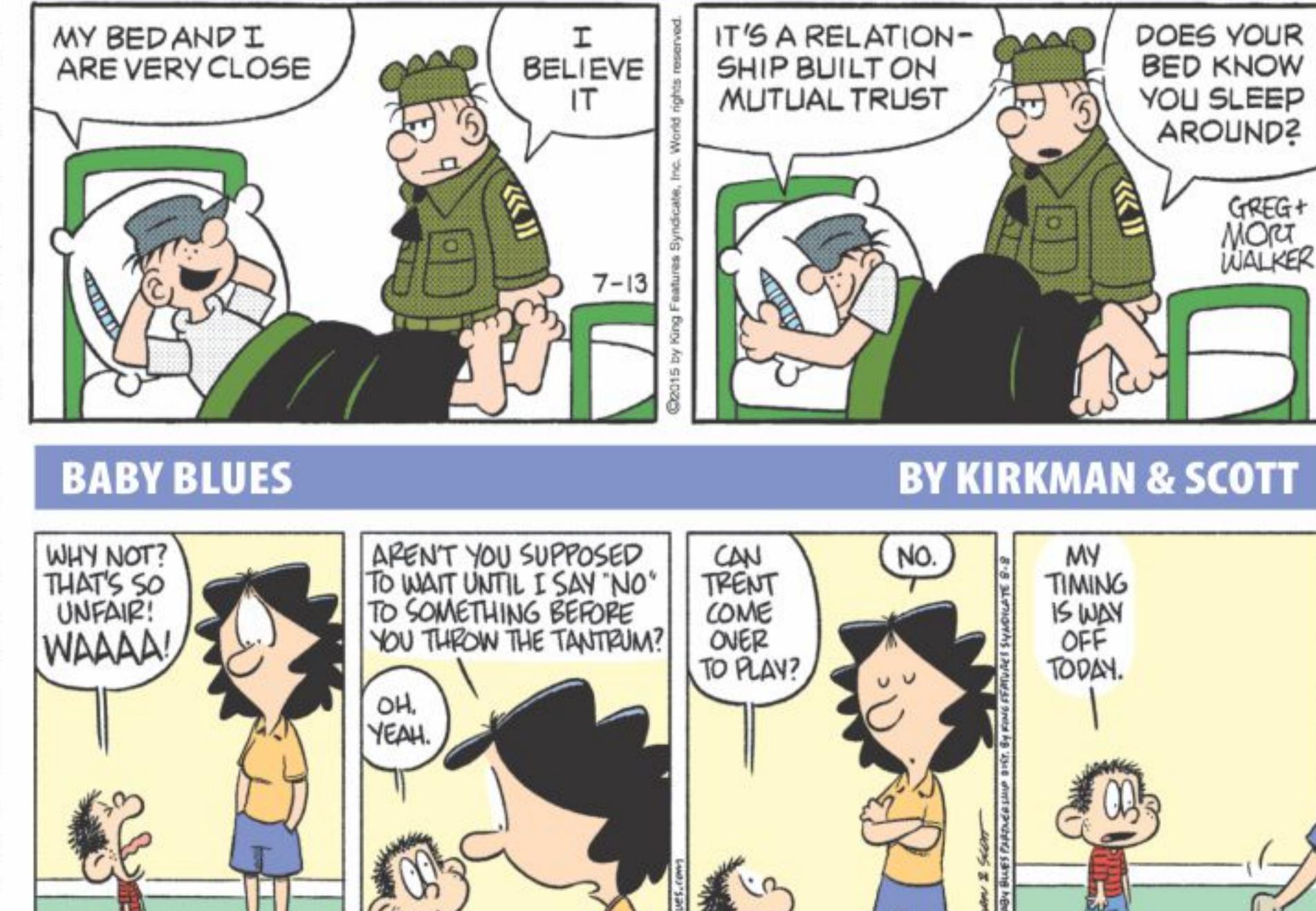
## DOWN

- 1 Flat floater
- 5 Torch holder
- 11 Bassoon's cousin
- 12 Hire
- 13 Designer Wang
- 14 Made speeches
- 15 Moose's cousin
- 16 Young kangaroo
- 17 Praises
- 19 Put in stitches
- 22 Celeb roster
- 24 Chump
- 26 Sound system
- 27 Clock unit
- 28 Like draft beer
- 30 Oversight
- 31 "You betcha!"
- 32 Some messages
- 10 Conclusion
- 16 Stick out
- 18 Nepal setting
- 19 Pockets at the mall
- 20 Flightless birds
- 21 Had on
- 22 Sailor's call
- 23 Script unit
- 25 Spiced tea
- 32 Some messages
- 33 Comes together
- 34 River of Arizona
- 36 Chess castle
- 37 Nile reptiles
- 38 Fall mo.
- 39 Neither follower
- 40 Sock part
- 41 Mex. neighbor

## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



## BEETLE BAILEY



## BY MORT WALKER



## BY KIRKMAN &amp; SCOTT

