

Conviction of 'Butcher of Bosnia'

Justice shall prevail over crime

THE conviction of Ratko Mladic, the notorious Serb military commander known as 'Butcher of Bosnia', of genocide and crimes against humanity for orchestrating Europe's worst atrocity since World War II is a triumph of justice. The ruling shows that justice will eventually prevail and spare no one, no matter how politically powerful the criminals are. We commend the UN Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for the milestone ruling.

Mladic's most atrocious misdeeds include the Srebrenica massacre, in which forces under his direct command slaughtered thousands of Muslims, and the siege of Sarajevo, which killed more than 10,000 civilians.

True, it took more than two decades to see the end of justice. And the ruling may not assuage the tremendous pain and sufferings of family members of the victims of the massacres. No other nation, more than the people of Bangladesh can relate easily to the pain and sufferings of the people of Srebrenica and Bosnia and Herzegovina, since we had also gone through similar agony.

Incidentally, the same day Ratko Mladic was awarded life sentence in The Hague, Bangladesh's war crimes tribunal condemned six local collaborators of the Pakistani army to death for their involvement in massacres during the War of Liberation. It is another reminder that those who commit genocide and crimes against humanity can, and will be, brought to book, if there is will and determination, no matter how long it takes.

We believe the ruling by the tribunal will pave the way for many injustices, committed in the past and being committed now, to be redressed. Those who are committing crimes against humanity like in Myanmar and Syria should take note that they are putting themselves up as candidates to be tried as war criminals.

Now BCL units in schools!

The logic beats us

WE are surprised to learn that Bangladesh Chhatra League is planning to form committees at the secondary school level. BCL leaders, after a meeting on Tuesday, said the objective behind the move is to spread the ideology of the party among the schoolchildren. Whatever may be the motive behind such a move, it would adversely impact the tender minds of children, and given the current nature of student politics this will introduce the kind of violence that we are witnessing in some public colleges and universities.

The character of student politics today bears no resemblance to what we saw of it in the past. Student politics, since the anti-autocracy movement in late 80s, has been on a path of steady decline and doesn't serve the interests of the general students any longer, which begs the question: what is student politics for then? The fact is, student political bodies are now merely an extension of their parent political parties, who use them to solidify their control over the future generation of leaders. According to an estimate, in the last eight years, incidents of violence and infighting among student groups at different universities and colleges have resulted in at least 125 deaths, of which 60 were due to internal feuds in BCL. If BCL committees are formed in schools now, it may in all likelihood expose the children to the same kind of violent and exploitative politics.

The Awami League leadership has previously denied having any kind of association with the organisations using children in the name of "League." But mere words are not going to help. They should try and nip in the bud any kind of initiatives embroiling children in politics.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Biodiversity in South and Southeast Asia

Countries in South and Southeast Asia have varied agro-climatic zones representing unique terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, forests, spectacular wildlife, and unimaginably rich biodiversity.

The region is also characterised by explosive growth of human populations, struggling economies, ethnic conflicts, poverty and political destabilisation in different pockets. As a result, it has become a hotspot for rampant poaching, illegal trafficking of wildlife, major and minor forest products, drug and human trafficking, etc.

If the regional countries do not cooperate with one another, very little success can be expected in terms of protecting the rich forests and wildlife of the region. Both SAARC and ASEAN can serve as important platforms to bridge the gap among the nations in order to protect their precious natural resources and biodiversity.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada



Making strides in workers' rights

Five years after Tazreen, grassroots, worker-led negotiations are pushing the boundaries of what is possible in the RMG sector

FARZANA NAWAZ

ON November 24, 2012 a fire broke out in Tazreen Fashions garment factory in Ashulia that led to the death of at least 112 workers trapped in a building without adequate emergency exits. The Tazreen fire, followed by the Rana Plaza collapse five months later, was a watershed moment for the readymade garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh. These catastrophes forced the global community to focus their attention on the working conditions of garment workers and led to a range of actions from international brands, governments, civil society and factory owners to tackle the issue of workplace safety. However, while the conversation has mostly focused on high-level internationally led initiatives such as the Accord and the Alliance, little has been reported on the impressive gains made by workers themselves to improve their working conditions and raise standards in the industry.

Worker-led organisations such as the Awaj Foundation have taken initiatives to train workers to raise awareness on their rights and responsibilities, and develop their capacity to bargain collectively and unionise. Enabling the workers themselves to articulate their demands has led to a much more nuanced conversation on improving working conditions that goes beyond the narrow focus on building and fire safety. It has allowed women workers (the majority of the workforce) to push for better maternity leave, quality day-care facilities for their children, paid time off to attend trainings, legal aid support, health care services for themselves and their children, and better accountability for workplace violence, among others.

At the same time, Awaj Foundation has undertaken efforts to improve relationships between workers and management at factories through social dialogue. A wide range of stakeholders, such as unions, participation committees, safety and welfare committees, human resource departments, management and other decision-makers were involved in the social dialogue process. The capacity of mid-level managers at factories had to be developed to raise their awareness on workers' rights through dialogue and trainings organised by donors. It has taken years of work inside and outside factories to develop trust between the different parties, but this collaborative approach has helped improve relationships



Debris covered the floor of the nine-storeyed Tazreen Fashions plant in Savar, on November 26, 2012.

PHOTO: AFP

between owners, management and workers and has created a better negotiating environment.

These dedicated efforts over the past five years are now starting to bear fruit. Last year there were 10 collective bargaining agreements in the RMG sector and Awaj provided support in developing six of them. These agreements are exemplary because the workers were able to negotiate for terms that go far beyond the minimum legal requirement. For example, while the labour law mandates a wage increase of five percent per year, workers were able to negotiate increases of eight percent or more; the workers are entitled to 11 days of festival leave every year by law, but these agreements included leave of 14 to 22 days; workers were also able to give input into developing menus for day-care centres in factories to ensure that their children are given nutritious food. In one large factory with over 7,000 workers they were able to negotiate that the employer would pay for the ultrasound check-ups of pregnant workers. This is quite an achievement considering that termination for becoming pregnant is

still a widespread practice in the industry.

Workers were also able to argue for provisions that would help create a better environment for them to organise at the factories. They gained concessions on paid days off to attend union meetings and trainings, space allocation for a union office and better grievance handling mechanisms for workplace disputes and sexual harassment. The collective bargaining agreements also stipulate that monthly union dues will be collected directly by payroll and deposited into the union bank account. This process, while common for unions in developed countries, had never been implemented in Bangladesh, until now.

It is obvious that some of these measures will lead to increased costs for factory owners, at least on the surface, and these agreements were not easy to negotiate. In most cases, employers were not keen to do more than what is legally required of them. However, workers, with the support of Awaj Foundation, were able to convince factory owners and management that an adequate salary and facilities that allow workers to better take

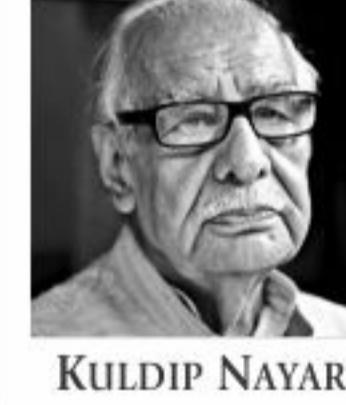
care of their health and their families are good for productivity at the factories. Good morale at work helps reduce absenteeism and attracts and helps retain skilled workers. What is good for workers is ultimately also good for business.

The examples set by these agreements concretely demonstrate that empowering workers with good negotiating skills and an environment that allows for collective bargaining can bring about enormous positive changes to working and living conditions of workers. The success of these collective bargaining agreements can be replicated in many more factories across the country in the coming years. While the global struggle for a living wage and better working conditions in the RMG sector continues, we hope that these agreements led by workers can help set examples of what is achievable and inspire others in the RMG sector in Bangladesh and across the world.

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Challenge before Rahul Gandhi

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

POLITICAL parties all over the world have come to be closed shops. What is known as the "High Command" usually dictates on who will be installed as the president. Rahul Gandhi has been "elected" as the Congress president. The outgoing chief Sonia Gandhi saw to it that her son would occupy the top party position.

I had seen the change in the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom from close quarters when I was India's High Commissioner at London in the nineties. Margaret Thatcher was the prime minister. But she was asked to step down and she had to abide by the orders of the party.

I asked her directly why she was doing so. Her

Gandhi's residence and Manmohan Singh fitted into her scheme of things.

The government's secret files would go to her residence where her political secretary Ahmed Patel first vetted them and then sent them to Sonia Gandhi for her approval. So much so that Manmohan Singh came to be known as an "accidental prime minister" and a book by his press officer also confirmed the expression. When he was asked to comment on the title given to him, he merely said that posterity would judge.

Newspaper reports published since then confirmed that he was merely the mukuta (mask) and in his name the administration ran from 10 Janpath. In fact, even Rahul Gandhi once denounced the controversial ordinance to negate the supreme court verdict on convicted lawmakers as "complete nonsense" and said what "our government has done is wrong." This was a huge embarrassment for the UPA government and



Rahul Gandhi has been elected as the Congress president. The outgoing chief Sonia Gandhi saw to it that her son would occupy the top party position.

PHOTO: AFP

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

It is another matter that Congress President Sonia Gandhi and other party members stood behind what Manmohan Singh had said. But then the damage had already been done. There were several other occasions when the prime minister was ridiculed by the party members, including those who were a part of the inner circle. It is unfortunate that Manmohan Singh himself felt that he was only keeping the chair of prime minister warm for Rahul Gandhi to take over.

The anointment of Rahul Gandhi as party president has not come as a surprise at all. But it does underline the fact that there is no other go for the Congress except depending on the dynasty to give a name which

is generally acceptable to the country. Priyanka Vadra could have perhaps been the right choice in the eyes of the Congress stalwarts. But nobody dares Sonia who has decided that her son would take over. This is said to be the practice in Italy where the son inherits the mantle.

But the million-dollar question is whether Rahul would fit in the role he is expected to perform? I recall the initial days of Indira Gandhi when after the sudden death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the then Congress President K Kamaraj installed her as the prime minister. I asked him then why did he choose her? He said that before his death, Jawaharlal Nehru had indicated that his successor would be Shastri. When Kamaraj asked Nehru specifically why not Indira Gandhi, he said: Not now.

Morarji Desai, the claimant, did not agree to the choice of Indira Gandhi and insisted on election. With the party president and other stalwarts opposing him, Morarji Desai lost the race. It is another matter that Kamaraj was subsequently sidelined. I was in the thick of things and asked Kamaraj why he preferred Indira Gandhi over Morarji Desai? His answer was that "Morarji was too rigid and did not believe in principal of consensus."

The timing of Rahul's anointment as party president has come at a time when the Congress has lost its sheen. The party still believes that he would be able to dispel the magic of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his home state which is going to the polls next month. Understandably, the Congress has struck a seat-adjustment deal with the Patidars to capture power in Gujarat. But it remains to be seen whether Rahul Gandhi will be able to make the turn around which the party is looking for.

In the past, when he was made vice-president and poll campaigner he miserably failed in states like Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and even in Uttar Pradesh where the Congress had a poll alliance with the Samajwadi Party. In other words, he could not make much of a difference to the fortunes of the party. Unfortunately, despite having some stalwarts in the party, the deep-rooted culture of dynasty has come to prevail.

The biggest challenge for Rahul Gandhi is the forthcoming election in Gujarat. In fact, this is a key election for all political parties, including the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Apart from Rahul Gandhi, the state assembly polls will also be a litmus test for both Prime Minister Modi and BJP President Amit Shah. They will leave no stone unturned to see that their party wins because what happens in Gujarat would decide the fate of general elections, due two years later. This will also show which way the wind is blowing.

But then two years is too long a period to depend on what happens now. The Congress which is irrelevant now may retrieve the ground because no government can meet the demands of what people want.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.