

Another unexplained disappearance

Such occurrences must be stopped

IT has come to light that yet another person has also gone missing following a string of high-profile disappearances that include NSU teacher Mubashar Hasan who went missing exactly a month ago. This time it's former Bangladesh ambassador to Vietnam Maroof Zaman who has remained traceless since Monday night after he left his Dhanmondi residence to pick his daughter from the airport. Reportedly, three men entered his home and took away his laptop, desktop and camera after Maroof Zaman called his house and told the house help to let them take his laptop that same night. At a time when the fate of many missing persons remains unknown, the mysterious disappearance of the ex-envoy following these suspicious circumstances only adds to the prevailing sense of fear among the public that anyone can go missing anytime and is a major blow to their sense of security.

While we know that there may be various reasons behind a person going missing, the manner in which law enforcement agencies have been handling these cases raises many questions. Families of the missing persons are left in the dark about the whereabouts of their loved ones months on end with no knowledge of the progress of the investigations. Eyewitness reports of plainclothes men entering the homes of some of these individuals prior to them going missing and the public perception that law enforcers are involved in some of these cases cannot be ignored.

Far too many cases of disappearances have occurred in the recent months and too many of them have remained unsolved for the citizenry to remain calm. There is a suppressed anxiety all around. The government must be more effective and launch vigorous investigations into these cases to find the missing persons. This abhorrent trend of people simply going "missing" cannot be allowed to continue.

Customs houses all clogged up

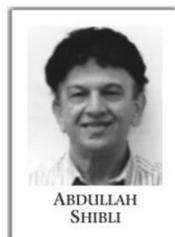
Why haven't goods been auctioned off?

IT is astounding that 32.5 lakh tonnes of imported goods worth Tk 9,509 crore have been lying unclaimed for months at 17 sea and land customs houses and stations nationwide. Apparently, these clearing houses are now inundated with 100 types of goods that have been accumulating from July, 2016 till October, 2017. We understand that the rules stipulate that unless goods are not claimed within a month of arrival, they are supposed to be sold off. Yet we see no such move by the Customs authorities to follow the rules. It certainly raises eye brows because some of the items stored are beginning to deteriorate in quality and soon may be rendered worthless.

From what we understand of the situation, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) has communicated repeatedly with authorities running these houses and stations enquiring about why these items are being hoarded against rules. Such inaction opens up the room for speculation that there are unscrupulous elements involved here who may wish to siphon off unclaimed goods. It is not merely a question of rules not being adhered to; rather unclaimed goods are taking up precious space at depots where legitimate importers may keep their goods upon import. Unfortunately, it would appear that we are fast becoming a nation that does not believe in following the rules of business. The same situation unfortunately exists at Chittagong port where importers have been counting the cost of delayed release, which, for some companies, can extend to months. We hope that Customs authorities will accelerate the settlement process of unclaimed containers and goods to both expedite business and generate revenue.

WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

Rejuvenating free trade



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THE Eleventh Ministerial Conference (MC11) of the World Trade Organization will be held on December 10-13 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The

meeting of this highest decision-making body of the WTO, which meets at least once every two years, is taking place at a critical moment of the free trade movement. WTO and free trade are threatened by the emergence of protectionist and anti-trade sentiments amongst many of the organisation's 164 members, and squabbling among the world's largest traders, including the USA, China, and even the generally free-trade oriented European Union. If countries lower the tariff rates against imports and refrain from imposing non-tariff barriers against trade, it benefits free trade and promotes growth.

However, in recent years since 2010, we have witnessed a slowdown in the growth of world trade, and it is predicted that in the current environment the "new normal" is a modest growth as compared with the rapid expansion of trade relations during 1990-2010. The most ominous trend seems to be that many free trade agreements of the last decade including NAFTA and TPP are now under siege.

WTO was set up in 1995 under the Marrakesh Agreement and regulates international trade in goods, services, and intellectual property between participating countries "by providing a framework for negotiating trade agreements and dispute resolution." Unfortunately, the key mission of WTO—to lower tariffs and facilitate increased global trade—suffered a major setback with the collapse of the Doha Round, whose objective was to lower trade barriers around the world, and thus facilitate increased global trade.

The last ministerial conference of WTO took place in December 2015. To stay relevant, the next conference needs to address five issues: (1) trade in non-agricultural goods; (2) trade in services; (3) e-commerce; (4) improved rules on distortions regarding state-owned enterprises (SOE), local content requirements (ROO) and export restrictions; and (5) investment. Obviously, it would be too much to expect that MC11 will address all these issues in four days, but the trade ministers and senior officials attending the conference must make a commitment to move forward with them. For developing countries, trade is



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their "engine of growth."

In the last few years, globalisation and trade liberalisation have been buzzwords at international forums and the media. However, some statistics have shown that decline in trade volume took a downturn in the early 1990s. According to IMF data, the global trade elasticity peaked in 1991-1995, much before the recent financial crisis, and has been declining since then. Trade Elasticity (TE) refers to the ratio of trade growth to GDP growth rates. TE was 1 during 1981-1985, meaning that trade grew at the same rate as GDP, and started to climb, reaching a level over 2.5 during 1991-2000. As mentioned, trade growth has not been robust in recent years and is hovering below 1.5 as this decade winds down.

Many factors have contributed to this slowdown; the ones that readily come to mind are protectionist measures taken by all countries since the financial crisis in 2009, and backpedalling on trade reforms. Even voters in major western countries are turning their backs on globalisation as evidenced by recent electoral results in the USA, UK, and Germany. According to a Wall Street Journal-NBC polls conducted in the US, just 31 percent of GOP respondents in December 1999 said free trade deals hurt the US. "By February 2017, when the question was posed slightly differently, a majority of GOP voters polled said free trade hurt the country."

Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel laureate in

economics, attributes this resurgence in protectionism to the failure of governments to protect workers and vulnerable population who equate trade with job losses.

How can WTO help reverse the trend described above? First of all, the meeting of MC needs to address the anti-trade sentiment. Retraining of workers and employment generation must work hand in hand with lower tariffs. Member-countries must also check their impulses to look for quick fixes to correct trade deficits as the USA is doing. "Nearly all WTO members engage to one degree or another in backsliding, sometimes through the use of legal but restrictive measures (e.g. raising tariffs up to the bound rate or employing the trade-remedy laws) and sometimes imposing measures that are found to violate their WTO commitments."

The upcoming ministerial-level meeting comes at a time when trade, and the future of trade, is at a crossroads. Many in the international business community have voiced their concern, to cite an example, against "European Commission (EC) proposals to adopt new rules for taxing the digital economy within the single market, which would essentially create new tax barriers and ultimately undermine global efforts to establish a consistent international tax landscape." From mid-October 2016 to mid-May 2017, WTO members implemented 74 new trade-restrictive measures, amounting to an average of

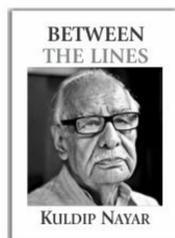
almost 11 new measures per month.

WTO needs to recognise the concerns of developing countries particularly their micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). "Despite their economic importance in developed, developing and least-developed countries, MSMEs' share of trade is disproportionately small, often because they are unaware of the potentially wider market and because they traditionally have not had the resources to navigate sometimes complex trading procedures. But new technologies are helping to pare back these obstacles and create a more level playing field for smaller companies in international trade. Helping more MSMEs to trade internationally is an important step in building a more inclusive trading system that benefits a wider array of citizens."

Recently IMF, WTO and the World Bank came out with a policy document entitled, "Making Trade an Engine of Growth for All: The Case for Trade and For Policies to Facilitate Adjustment" with a clarion call for liberalisation and better rules. The role of trade as a driver of growth is threatened, according to the report, which called for action to better communicate the benefits of open trade to a public that may have become more sceptical, especially in advanced economies.

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No alternative to dynastic rule



KULDIP NAYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES
THERE is no surprise. It was well known that the Congress Party is hopelessly dependent on the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Elevation of Rahul Gandhi to the post of Congress

president was along the expected lines. But Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar has given another dimension to the happening. He has likened Rahul's succession to the Mughal dynasty. He says that the king's son would always be the king.

Whatever be the declaration of the party, it is nothing but a dynastic show. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru groomed his daughter Indira Gandhi to the position. At the Congress Working Committee where then party president UN Dhebar proposed Indira Gandhi's name, Home Minister GB Pant said that she should not be bothered as she did not enjoy a good health. Nehru objected to his remark and said that Indira was far better in health than he and Pant were. Indira was then elected as the party president.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi did not even argue otherwise. She straightaway put her son, Rahul Gandhi, in the chair. There was a rumour that she would name her daughter, Priyanka Vadra, because Rahul Gandhi was not selling in any way. But then the Italians, like Indians, prefer son to the daughter for inheritance.

To justify Rahul Gandhi's elevation, Congress leader Jyotiraditya Scindia said that it was the beginning of a new era. Senior Congress leader Digvijay Singh said that the issue of Rahul's elevation had to be decided by party president Sonia Gandhi and the Congress Working Committee. Even otherwise, he said, the grassroots Congress workers wanted the elevation to happen. "Yes, this is the common feeling among grassroots workers." But one could read Digvijay

Singh's disappointment.

In fact, the party would now run from 10 Janpath as it was done from the Teen Murti or Safdarjung residences of Nehru and Indira Gandhi during their tenure. Even otherwise, it was Sonia Gandhi who was reigning in when Dr Manmohan Singh was installed as prime minister. I was a witness to the drama at the central hall of parliament when members of the party wept that Sonia Gandhi should be the prime minister. But she kept quiet because Sonia had her son in mind. And

Rahul Gandhi has already made secularism as the plank. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) may not own Hindutva in public but it is all clear that the party would fight the next election in 2019 on the slogan of Hindutva alone. Prime Minister Narendra Modi makes no secret of the fact that he visits Nagpur, the RSS headquarters, and seeks guidance from leaders like Mohan Bhagwat. His slogan of *sab ka saath, sab ka vikas* has proved to be a mere slogan.

One can see that Muslims do not

general election. The whirlwind campaigning by Modi is already raising the question whether he is staking too much at the Gujarat assembly polls. Maybe, it could be because of the Patidars joining hands with the Congress in the state to fight against the BJP with the youth, who want a change, supporting them.

So far the record of Rahul Gandhi has not been impressive from any point of view. He has fought many elections, including UP, where he aligned with Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party. But this did not help and the Congress lost miserably, just reduced to the fourth position. Now he has to prove his popularity in the coming Gujarat election. If he fails, it would come to be known that he cannot win on his own.

It is surprising that Rahul Gandhi is defending the dynasty factor. He says that all parties are dependent on it, citing the examples of Punjab, UP, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. But what he forgets is that in all these states the parties have been coming to power alternatively. Can he or, for that matter, the Congress win a majority to form the government at the Centre? He will have to work hard if he wants the Congress to be in power. But at present he doesn't seem to have the pulling power. But the scene can change.

We have witnessed Indira Gandhi, who was called a *ghonghi gudua* (mute doll), becoming the prime minister and within a short period of time taking on the entire opposition. Even her son, Rajiv Gandhi, who was foisted upon by President Giani Zail Singh, was accepted. There is no reason why Rahul Gandhi would not come to be acknowledged.

But then it will depend on how he is able to pull along and help the party win elections. At this time it looks difficult because secularism has been pushed into the background. A soft-kind of Hindutva has spread all over the country. It is a pity that a country which fought for freedom on the plank of pluralism has not been able to follow the ethos of independence.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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TAREQUE MASUD

A landmark ruling!

The High Court's order for concerned parties to compensate the family of celebrated filmmaker Tareque Masud who was killed in a road accident in 2011 is a landmark verdict in our country's history. This will hopefully set a precedent for other victims or their families to receive compensation for their losses as well.

The ruling was apparently based on the Motor Vehicles Ordinance, 1983. However, what is unclear is how the compensation amount was determined, so I think it will benefit the public going forward if the authorities made that clear.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, By email

In the interview of Dr Maung Zarni titled "Ending the genocide is not profitable," published in the Opinion page of *The Daily Star* on December 6, the sentence which reads, "one of them is ethnic cleansing which has legal basis in international law," was incorrect. The sentence should read "... which has no legal basis in international law." We apologise for the error.