

Family terrorised over land

Bring masterminds of the plot to justice

THE dreadful ordeal of a family, terrorised over an 8.5 katha land by a gang of miscreants that included ruling party men, is alarming. We are aghast by such criminal behaviour which again brings to light how affiliation with powerful quarters and influence are being abused to intimidate, terrorise and blatantly rob people at gunpoint in our country—in this case, literally.

In an attempt to grab land, as this newspaper reported yesterday, a group of thugs forcibly entered into a house in the capital's Shyamoli and abducted the house owner, his wife, aunt, friend, caretaker and house help, looted valuables, and took away the furniture on a pick-up van. From the accounts of victims and law enforcers, it looks as if the gang's entire operation was thoroughly planned in advance. The audacity shown by the perpetrators and involvement of ruling party men added to that, further suggests that this could have been orchestrated by a well organised and powerful syndicate.

This, the authorities should seriously take note of. And the ruling party itself should look into how its cadres came to be involved with such serious crimes and whether the involvement of its party members runs deeper than what has so far been unearthed. Because it is important to remember that such gangs cannot operate so openly and boldly without having the backing of some powerful quarters.

We are pleased that the police have already arrested some of the accused. However, to avoid such terrifying incidents that considerably damage the state of law and order in the country, as well as people's confidence in it, the police must arrest all the accused and bring them to the court of justice. And that includes the masterminds behind this heinous plot and the syndicates that carry them out.

Necessity is the mother of invention

RMG workers' novel way to beat the system

IF picture speaks a thousand words then the one carried in the back page of this paper on Sunday speaks more than that. It shows several women garment workers walking on a footpath unshod, to grab a quick lunch since they don't carry lunch to work. They had come out without footgear to give a slip to their work supervisors because if they were detected leaving the factory premises during lunch break, they would have to pay for their absence from their wages.

We do not know if that is the order of things in all other RMG factories. Such a draconian rule, applied particularly in the case of women workers, is utterly irrational. Why on earth should workers be restricted to their workplace during meal breaks? It may not be possible for every woman worker, working morning shifts particularly, to prepare lunch for herself since she has to complete many chores before leaving for work. And the meals offered in the factory cafés, where that is done, may not be economical for them. And in any case, a break is a worker's right, and she or he must be free to spend it the way he or she pleases to.

It is a good idea to take a break outside the factory premises since shop floors can indeed be stifling, and a breather in more open space is good for health. It is for that reason alone that factory workers should be allowed out during breaks. We would urge the factory owners not to be so restrictive.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Reflections on Int'l Women's Day

International Women's Day has just passed by. And as usual, there was much pomp and celebration all around the world; there is of course no denying the progress achieved in the realm of women's rights. But I think introspection is something we tend to lack when it comes to Women's Day. If we truly want to be honest with ourselves, we should look at both the good and the bad. For anyone who is remotely aware of the situation in Bangladesh, Women's Day would not put him or her in a "celebratory" mood. Not a day goes by that I don't read news related to violence against women in the country. The harsh reality is that the majority of women and girls here live without a basic sense of security—something that women in many parts of the world enjoy today.

Taskia Siddiqui, By email

Scrap the BJMC

Recently, the Finance Minister AMA Muhith opined that the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation should be scrapped. BJMC has been incurring heavy financial loss since its inception. Successive governments have poured in huge sums of money to compensate for the loss of the industry.

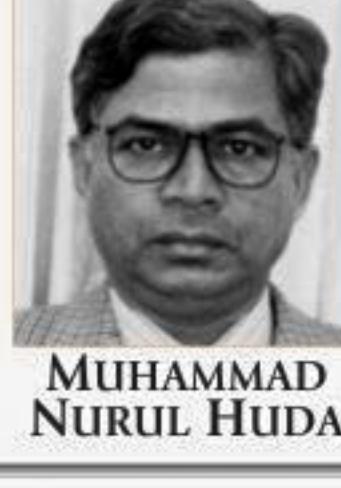
Many workers who spent their lives working in this industry and have now grown old are yet to receive service benefits. I am one of them.

I resigned from a jute mill in 1992, having realised that its future was gloomy. I haven't received my service benefits as of yet. Had I not resigned at that time, my life would probably have been miserable. I, therefore, agree with the finance minister that the government should scrap the BJMC.

Md Ashraf Hossain, By email

How relevant is the existing quota system?

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE recent demonstrations by students demanding an end to the existing Bangladesh Civil Service quota system in the recruitment process deserve urgent attention

of the government. The rationale for the introduction of the quota system had its roots in the policy for recruitment to public service that was adopted in September 1972. The stated objective of the policy was to achieve more equitable representation of the residents of all the districts of Bangladesh in various services and posts.

The Public Administration Reforms Commission, June 2000 has questioned the existing system of quota distribution. In so doing, it has placed its trust on the relevant clause of the Constitution and concluded that quota reservation would be constitutionally valid only in case of women and backward classes of the country. It has further concluded that keeping the quota system alive to the exclusion of equality of opportunity in public employment for all classes of citizens will be a very weak alternative.

Unfortunately, it is a matter of record that the Public Service Commission's repeated recommendations for a revision of the quota system, especially in the freedom fighter category and those relating to tribal population and women, all of which were aimed at ensuring merit-based recruitment, were disregarded by the government. Political expediencies, rather than sound principles conducive to the growth of a stable and efficient civil service, dominated the decision-making process in respect to recruitment.

Although, the quota system in the recruitment to the various services and posts is a product of both history and politics. Past governments in our country refrained from making any appropriate changes in the system perhaps for fear of losing popularity. It should be understood, however, that the quota system that now exists is not what it used to be before. It was never district-based.



Students demanding reforms in the quota system in government jobs.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

It is unlikely that given the perception that each political government had displayed in the past, there would be any improvement in the quota system soon, even though there was, and still is, enough logic to reverse it.

It needs to be mentioned that during the mid-seventies and eighties, the military governments did revise the system leading first to a rise in the merit-based quota from 20 percent to 40 percent, and then to 45 percent. The policymakers, today or tomorrow, must come to a decision about this thorny issue. They must decide whether the so-called equitable principles should dominate recruitment in public service or it should be based on merit.

Interestingly, it has not occurred to anyone that even the existing quota system could not ensure equitable representation in the service. Dhaka district has the largest share. So far, the recommendation of the Public Service Commission to move away from the so-called district/division quota system went unheeded. The district-based quota system is affecting women candidates as

well as other candidates from particular districts who had displayed their competitive ability in the recruitment tests. The quota system, except for the reservation of posts for tribal candidates, is not in conformity with Article 29 (3) of the constitution.

According to a study, not even half of the quota reserved for the freedom fighters could be fulfilled and the successful candidates in this category in terms of percentage stood at one percent in 1989-90. The Public Service Commission then emphatically stated that there was absolutely no justification or logic to continue with the 30-percent quota in this category.

Meanwhile, because of the district-based and other quota reservation system, better candidates cannot be recruited. This, therefore, justifies the repeated recommendations made by the Public Service Commission that quota reserved for the tribal population and women should not be tied to the district quota, and should be done on a nation-wide basis. The same applies to the quota reservation system for the

wards of freedom fighters and "shaheed" freedom fighters.

The quota system encourages corruption in bureaucracy. At entry level, an applicant may get a residence certificate from the appropriate authority from the district which is declared eligible. In case of recruitment by competitive examination, a candidate may provide a similar certificate showing a district to which he originally belonged but in fact is not a resident of. There is also enough evidence showing that the decision to reserve 30 percent of the posts for the wards of the freedom fighters is also open to abuse.

Over the years, merit has consistently been a casualty in the public service recruitment process. This cannot be allowed to continue in the interest of public service. To quote an editorial in *The Daily Star*: "The challenge is to strike the right balance between a reasonable share of quotas—instead of a large percentage as 56—and meritocracy in an equitable manner so that no single group is disproportionately favoured."

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP and a columnist at *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

When shall we overcome?

BUSINESS & FINANCE



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

IN 1967, riots erupted in cities throughout the United States, from Newark, New Jersey, to Detroit and Minneapolis in the Midwest—all two years after the Watts neighbourhood of Los Angeles exploded in violence. In response, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission, headed by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, to

investigate the causes and propose measures to address them. Fifty years ago, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (more widely known as the Kerner Commission), issued its report, providing a stark account of the conditions in America that had led to the disorders.

The Kerner Commission described a country in which African-Americans faced systematic

Commission report's most famous line—"Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal"—still rings true.

The just-published book based on our efforts, *Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report*, edited by Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, makes for bleak reading. As I wrote in my chapter, "Some problematic areas identified in the Kerner Report have gotten better (participation in politics and government by black Americans—symbolised by the election of a black president), some have stayed the same (education and employment disparities), and some have gotten worse (wealth and income inequality)." Other chapters discuss one of the most disturbing aspects of America's racial inequality: inequality in securing access to justice, reinforced by a system of mass incarceration largely targeted at African-Americans.

There is no doubt that the civil rights movement of a half-century ago made a difference. A variety of overt

1963 march on Washington, which I joined and at which he delivered his ringing, unforgettable "I Have a Dream" speech, a march for jobs and freedom. And yet the economic divide in the US has grown much wider, with devastating effects on those without a college education, a group that includes almost three-quarters of African-Americans.

Beyond this, discrimination is rampant, if often hidden. America's financial sector targeted African-Americans for exploitation, especially in the years before the financial crisis, selling them volatile products with high fees that could, and did, explode. Thousands lost their homes, and in the end, the disparity in wealth, already large, increased even more. One leading bank, Wells Fargo, paid huge fines for charging higher interest rates to African-American and Latino borrowers; but no one was really held accountable for the many other abuses. Almost a half-century after the enactment of anti-discrimination laws, racism, greed, and market power still work together to the disadvantage of African-Americans.

There are, however, several reasons for hope. First, our understanding of discrimination is far better. Back then, the Nobel laureate economist Gary Becker could write that in a competitive market, discrimination was impossible; the market would bid up the wage of anyone who was underpaid. Today, we understand that the market is rife with imperfections—including imperfections of information and competition—that provide ample opportunity for discrimination and exploitation.

Moreover, we now recognise that the US is paying a high price for inequality, and an especially high price for its racial inequality. A society marked by such divisions will not be a beacon to the world, and its economy will not flourish. The real strength of the US is not its military power but its soft power, which has been badly eroded not just by Trump, but also by persistent racial discrimination. Everyone will lose if it is not addressed.

The most promising sign is the outpouring of activism, especially from young people, who realise that it is high time that the US lives up to its ideals, so nobly expressed in its Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. A century and a half after the abolition of slavery, the legacy of that system lingers. It took a century to enact legislation ensuring equal rights; but today, Republican-controlled courts and politicians often renege on that commitment.

As I concluded my chapter, "An alternative world is possible. But 50 years of struggle has shown us how difficult it is to achieve that alternative vision." Further progress will require determination, sustained by the faith expressed in the immortal words of the spiritual that became the hymn of the civil rights movement: "We shall overcome."

Joseph E. Stiglitz is the winner of the 2001 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. His most recent book is *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited: Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump*.

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Picketers calling for the removal of National Guard troops from Newark march near City Hall, July 16, 1967.

discrimination, suffered from inadequate education and housing, and lacked access to economic opportunities. For them, there was no American dream. The root cause was "the racial attitude and behaviour of white Americans toward black Americans. Race prejudice has shaped our history decisively; it now threatens to affect our future."

I was part of a group convened by the Eisenhower Foundation to assess what progress had been made in the subsequent half-century. Sadly, the Kerner

forms of discrimination were made illegal. Societal norms changed. But rooting out deep-seated and institutional racism has proven difficult. Worse, President Donald Trump has exploited this racism and fanned the flames of bigotry.

The core message of the new report reflects the great insight of the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr: achieving economic justice for African-Americans cannot be separated from achieving economic opportunities for all Americans. King called his August