


UPR DEBATE ON INVOLUNTARY DISAPPEARANCE IN BANGLADESH

A denial and THE REALITY


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LESS than a week ago, on September 20, 2018 the Consideration of the Universal Periodic Review Outcome of Bangladesh was held at the 39th regular session of Human Rights Council. Earlier on May 14, during a session of the working group the leader of the Bangladesh delegation and the Minister for Law, Anisul Huq, had dismissed the claims of involuntary disappearance in the country. He asserted that often cases of possible abduction of individuals were reported as enforced disappearances. He said, it was done with the “obvious intention of maligning the government and its achievements”. In many cases, the perceived victims had reappeared, proving the allegations of the “so-called enforced disappearance” false.

The leader of Bangladesh delegation reminded the assembly that the legal system of Bangladesh does not recognise the term “involuntary disappearance” though crimes of “abductions” and “kidnappings” are well defined in the criminal justice system of the country. He assured that any violation of law by anyone including law enforcement officials is dealt with under our existing legal provisions. The minister noted that

families of eight opposition activists. Now the platform comprises of forty families, including those of ruling party supporters, left leaning organisations and retired officials of army and foreign service. At that event the members of the platform had said that they were getting impatient at the inaction of the government. Some felt the approach of prodding, urging and pleading through holding of seminars, press conferences, conventions, human chains and submission of memorandums have thus far yielded little result. Others were angry at the silence and indifference of the authorities and the misinformation that is rolled out by the state agencies.

The narratives of the families of victims are remarkably similar. Their loved ones were picked up from roads, workplaces or their homes in the wee hours of the day by people claiming to be members of law enforcement agencies. In some cases they were uniformed and used clearly marked vehicles. In others, well-built men in plain clothes with close cropped hair and sporting walkie-talkies whisked the victims away in white vans. Not a single case was reported where a warrant of arrest was presented. In several instances concerned families were assured that the victims were being taken for routine interrogation and would soon be returned. Later their local police stations denied any knowledge of such detention.

how long should we have to wait to get an answer”, she asked. Rehana Khanam, sister of the disappeared student activist Pintu asked, “Does not the government have any responsibility if a person goes missing? To whom do we go for justice?” The members of the audience could not hold back tears when 4-5 children stood on the podium with the photos of their disappeared fathers making a poignant plea that like their other friends they wanted their fathers to accompany them to school and to the playgrounds.

It is unfortunate that instead of acknowledging the problem of involuntary disappearance the government has chosen to bury its head in the sand like an ostrich. The failure to recognise the reality of involuntary disappearance only encourages perpetrators to continue with the act. The seven-murder case of Narayanganj is an irrefutable evidence of that reality.

The ministerial observation that reappearance of some victims nullifies the claim of disappearance does not hold water. Within few weeks or months of their disappearance almost one-fourth of the 442 persons who disappeared from January 1, 2009 to August 30, 2018 surfaced in the custody of law enforcement agencies, against whom criminal charges were subsequently labelled (Asian Legal Resources Centre, 2018). A tiny number who were fortunate



PHOTO: STAR

Changing how we see vocational education

TASMIAH T RAHMAN

BANGLADESH has gone through both social and cultural changes during the past two decades. Things were very different for the youth in the 1990s compared to now. Free access to information via the internet has changed the way we think and has helped to shape our ideas. How we utilise information has also changed drastically. The world is much more global now. Gone are the days when we sat in front of the TV on a Wednesday night eagerly waiting for MacGyver to air on BTV!

But even though our access to entertainment has increased dramatically, we cannot say the same for education. Society has become very rigid when it comes to the education system. There is more divide in the system now than there was 30 years ago. There are English-medium and Bangla-medium schools leading to college and university education, technical vocational training, non-formal education, madrasa education, etc. These systems run parallel in a country where the mind-set of people towards technical education is still negative, even though unemployment among university graduates is as high as it has been in recent memory.

According to an Economist Intelligence Unit and British Council survey in 2014, Bangladesh had the lowest employability among university graduates in South Asia: 47 out of 100 to be precise. The number is staggeringly higher for women.

Even though specific technical skills can be the right way forward for the majority of young people who will be the drivers of Bangladesh's success, we are still falling short in realising that a university degree is not enough to meet the specific demands of the market. There are simply not enough jobs in the market to

rapidly growing worldwide! We, as parents with fewer children, want them to become either doctors, engineers or bankers—choose professions that are “socially” ranked higher than fashion designing. Having worked in the skills development sector, the narrative I hear too many times is that parents or well-wishers do not think that technical and vocational training can be a lucrative life choice. A person with a diploma is seen to be “less” successful than a “banker” even if they earn more.

As Bangladesh moves towards becoming a middle-income country, it has been rightly recognised that skills training on demand driven trades is the key to greater economic growth. In this regard, it has been repeatedly mentioned in various reports that utilising our current demographic dividend is crucial. But this is where the issue of perception comes in. Skills training, more commonly known as technical and vocational training, is regarded as education meant for the economically underprivileged and others. Most campaigns that the government and private or NGO training centres run focus largely on skilling the economically underprivileged and disadvantaged people. And it is also viewed that an unskilled and underprivileged youth should get “free” training and easy employment.

What we are missing here is a positive “perception” towards skills development. An underprivileged youth does not aspire to become a technician when it is seen as a menial job. They also dream of becoming a graduate, to be part of the white-collar labour force! We have hardly seen any marketing campaign showing someone from upper-class society doing a vocational training course and then running a successful business. We have not seen any advertisement of a young person utilising his or her technical skills to go abroad and become a highly skilled businessperson.

The challenge here is to change the mind-set around skills training. Practical skills should be valued regardless of a person's familial or economic background. Young people in Bangladesh should aspire to become practitioners who will drive the country's economic engine. To that end, more information should be available about skills training and communities should encourage young people to take up these professional jobs. University education should not be regarded as the only path to becoming an “active” member of the workforce. All students should have the scope to explore their interests in vocational training. It's time to break the stereotypes and bridge the gap between technical and academic education.

More focus should be given on changing the perception of existing vocational training opportunities through nationwide awareness programmes and advocacy. It should not be portrayed as an option for the less fortunate who can't invest in education and, thus, opt for technical training. More students should be encouraged to think outside the box, having fewer academic degrees and more practical knowledge, so that they can be highly skilled workers or entrepreneurs who create jobs—and do either of the two abroad. Only then can our country flourish and be the next Asian Tiger.

Tasmiah T Rahman is Head of Programme, Skills Development, BRAC.

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employ thousands of graduates who want to be either bankers or managers without having the right set of skills. There has to be more passionate practitioners and entrepreneurs who will enter the market and create jobs for people.

A successful approach will be to identify the skills that our youth are interested in and try to focus on giving them specialised support so that they can further hone these skills to be competitive in the market. For example, if someone is good at fashion designing, parents and well-wishers should encourage them to focus on being an entrepreneur or work in the fashion industry so that his or her full potential is realised. As we increasingly spend more time of the day at our workplaces, we need to be passionate about our work. But our traditional negative mindset about the fashion industry stops us from letting our children learn more about this industry that is



the enactment of the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act 2013 had been a testimony that Bangladesh accepted the recommendations of the second review cycle.

The denial of incidence of involuntary disappearance at the UPR is in sync with similar claims of law enforcement agencies and the recent statement of the home minister. That the latter maintained these alleged disappearances are essentially cases of people who go into hiding after failing in business and romantic relationships.

One would wish, before coming to such definitive conclusions and making assertions, the senior functionaries of the state had a session with the families of the victims of involuntary disappearance. Such a gathering was organised by Mayer Dak (the call of mothers) on August 30, in observance of the International Day of the Victims of Involuntary Disappearances. While sharing their experiences, often breaking into tears, parents, children and friends of victims of involuntary disappearance gave horrendous details of the ordeals that their loved ones and they had endured. For some, it has been a wait of more than five years.

The persistence of involuntary disappearance has resulted in the growing membership of the platform. Five years ago, Mayer Dak was an initiative only of

When families went to file cases the police refused to entertain them and advised at the most to register a general diary. No follow up or investigation was initiated. When families wanted to learn if any progress was made, in most cases they experienced non-cooperation and at best were told “*dekhchhi*” (we are looking into it).

While some mothers still cherish the hope that their disappeared son would one day knock on the door, others have reconciled that this will not happen. Lowering their expectations from the administration they just demand an inquiry into what had happened, an explanation as to why their innocent loved ones were picked up, and punishment for the perpetrators.

Jharna Khatun, wife of a former leader of the Students' Union said, “Give us proper information.” And asked the authorities to at least inform family members if they are still alive. Adding, “We will be able to endure it”. Shahnaz Begum, wife of BNP leader Humayun Kabir raised the question, “If indeed, involuntary disappearance is not taking place why then is the government barring visits of international organisations that are interested to investigate into the matter?” Marufa Islam, sister of BNP activist Shumon stated the family is at a loss when Shumon's son now enquires about the whereabouts of his father. “For


to return home have refused to speak about their ordeal. Some were found dead in ponds and roadsides, while about a third remains disappeared.

The argument that Bangladesh's legal lexicon has no place for terms like “enforced disappearance” also stands on shallow grounds. Laws are framed and updated to meet the needs of changing realities. If laws can be framed to combat terrorism, money laundering and digital security, surely there is sufficient ground to criminalise the act of involuntary disappearance and be party to the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Involuntary Disappearance, that came into force in 2010 (as of January 2018, signed by 97 and ratified by 57 states).

The loaded narratives of victim's families also dispel the thesis that they are pushing a hidden agenda of any nefarious quarter “to malign the government”. On the contrary, the ministerial denials coupled with actions and inactions of the state agencies only reinforce the perception of the existence of the scourge of involuntary disappearance in the country which the United Nations considers “a strategy to spread terror in the society”.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



SEPTEMBER 28, 1887
YELLOW RIVER FLOOD
Yellow River or Huáng Hé floods in China, killing between 900,000 and 2 million people. It is one of the deadliest natural disasters ever recorded.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Added frosting to

5 Poker costs

10 Part to play

11 Nose, in slang

13 Prayer ender

14 Shirt part

15 Diplomatic

17 Frat party

container

18 River mouth

area

19 Lyricist Gershwin

20 Free (of)

21 Schnitzel meat

22 “The Tempest”

sprite

25 Dixie damsel

26 Precious stones

27 Light metal

28 Had dinner

29 Space Needle

setting

33 Brewed drink

34 Policy offerer

35 Climate-affecting current

37 Solemn act

38 Fast pitch

39 Sweeping tale

40 Puts away

41 Dispatched

DOWN

1 Furious

2 Deep sleeps

3 Vote in

4 false teeth

5 Ridiculous

6 Nervous one

7 Golf support

8 Old Testament

book

9 Quite a few

12 Entertain

16 Go under

21 Risky enterprises

22 Some marbles

23 Narrates anew

24 Parent's warning

25 Prejudice

27 Some singers

29 Tendon

30 Rubbish

31 Admit

32 Put up

36 Altar vow

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

R	A	M	S	A	Y		A	L	E	S
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

DO YOU ALWAYS EAT IN BED? IT HELPS ME GET TO SLEEP. I GUESS THAT'S WHY IT'S CALLED “COMFORT FOOD”.

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

READY? HERE IT COMES! OOPS! WAIT, HOLD ON. JEEZE! HERE WE GO. OOF! DARN! WHOOPS! OKAY, THIS TIME FOR SURE... DAD JUST USE THE TEE!