

Failing to protect our children

Yet another minor domestic worker brutally tortured

THE Daily Star reported on December 15 how a 13-year-old domestic helper, Ruby, was frequently brutally tortured by her employers. According to a case filed against them, several parts of her skin were burned, while the doctor who was treating her found bruises and scars on her back and face.

In one instance, she was beaten so badly that she fainted. When taken to a nearby hospital, her situation was such that the hospital refused to treat her, understandably fearing legal trouble, and alerted the police. Only then did her ordeal come to light. Over the last few years, this newspaper reported on numerous such cases of extreme brutality against minor housemaids. Regrettably, nothing has so far managed to stop this kind of abuse.

The nature of the work of a housemaid is very informal, making it hard to regulate, leaving the workers without any legal protection. And the victims of brutality are often those who are underage, defenceless, stay confined to the employers' house and come from needy families and rural areas. More often than not, the victim's family is reluctant to pursue a legal battle and settle the matter out of the court.

Barely any steps have been taken to enforce existing laws that outlaw child labour, including underage children who work as domestic help. The state, too, has failed to make this issue a priority. The Labour Act 2013 (amended) has fixed the minimum age for admission to work at 14 years, but it unfortunately leaves domestic workers out of its purview. Furthermore, the Domestic Workers' Protection and Welfare Policy does not cover child domestic workers above 12 years of age. There is a clear lack of harmonisation of laws. The government should ratify the ILO convention 138 which has specific guidelines in terms of determining the minimum age for work. And most importantly, strict implementation of the law is needed to protect the rights of these children.

Exploitation of Rohingyas increasing with time

A permanent solution must be urgently found

ROHINGYAS living in Cox's Bazar and Rakhine State are increasingly at risk of becoming victims of trafficking following the Myanmar Army's brutal crackdown last year, law enforcement agencies and aid organisations have said. A number of UN agencies and international rights organisations had earlier come to the same conclusion through their own investigations which revealed that Rohingya men, women and children were being trafficked to different parts of Southeast Asia in greater and greater numbers, as the crisis drags on.

Over the last months, law enforcing agencies in Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries managed to rescue a number of such victims. To take just one example, Myanmar's naval authorities intercepted two boats carrying around 200 Rohingyas being trafficked in November on two separate occasions. However, concerns remain that despite some victims being rescued, the majority of those trafficked are escaping law enforcers' radar and being severely exploited—with women and children, both male and female, being forced into the sex trade.

Given the conditions that the Rohingyas have been compelled to live in—in Rakhine and within the confines of various refugee camps outside of Myanmar—for years now, it comes as no surprise that traffickers are easily deceiving them with false promises of greener pastures, only to have them back in chains of one form or another.

The bottom line is that the longer the crisis continues, the greater their vulnerability to internal and external exploitation—while allowing criminal networks to strengthen themselves through victimising the Rohingyas. That is why, international and regional organisations at all levels urgently need to put sufficient pressure on Myanmar to end the crisis, and to ensure that the Rohingya people can live safely, without having their basic rights violated, in their own country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

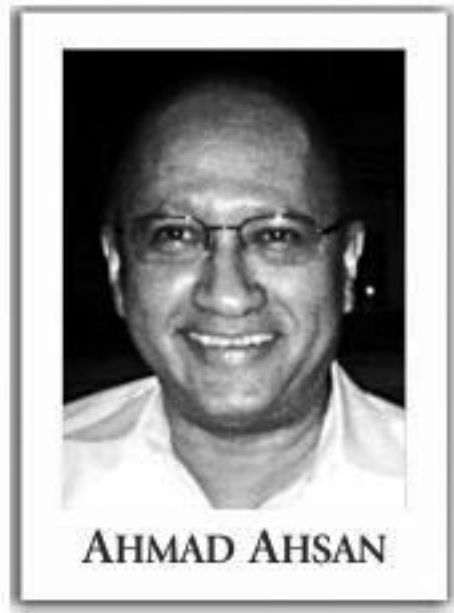
letters@thedailystar.net

What the "spirit of the Liberation War" means

We have become accustomed to a curious term: "the spirit of the Liberation War." From politicians to general people, they often vow to protect and uphold the spirit of the war. However, seldom do we stop to contemplate as to what the spirit of the Liberation War really means.

To me, the spirit of the Liberation War is all about standing up against injustice, discrimination and inequality. The true spirit of our glorious war, which resulted in our independence as a nation, means the rule of law, freedom (of speech, thoughts and expression) and democracy. Today, we are free from the oppressive regime of Pakistan. But as a nation, have we yet realised what "freedom" in its truest sense means? That, I believe, is a question we must ask ourselves.

Tahfeem Ahsan, University of Chittagong



World Bank team and I had spent that morning presenting a technical analysis of India's interregional development disparities to a national commission. Later, as I got up to leave from my working lunch with him, Mr Yugandhar suddenly asked me that question, adding a twist: "I don't want you to be technical. I want you to speak from your gut." That caught me completely off-guard. I responded that it was the Liberation War that explained Bangladesh's development success and gave my reasons. Yugandhar seemed convinced, something not easy for him.

Bangladesh belongs to a select group of countries that earned their freedom by winning a war of independence. But at the time of independence, in the wake of widespread devastation after nine months of war, the odds were stacked against Bangladesh. The war had destroyed thousands of roads, bridges, and culverts while the Chittagong port—the lifeline to the world—lay blocked by mines and sunken ships. Ten million displaced individuals were returning from India, often to destroyed homes. Millions had been killed, injured, assaulted, and raped during the war. In that bleak landscape, Bangladesh was hailed, quite appropriately, "as the test case for development."

Bangladesh has faced that test with vigour. On the 47th anniversary of victory in our war of independence, Bangladesh now stands in many ways as an inspiring example of development under democracy. Extreme poverty has declined by two thirds from 44 percent of the people in 1991, when democracy was restored, to 14 percent now. In critical indicators such as life expectancy (now nearly 73 years) and maternal and infant mortality, Bangladesh performs like a middle-income country—i.e. better than not only our neighbouring India and Pakistan, but also than the far more affluent Indonesia, the Philippines, or South Africa.

Economic growth has steadily accelerated especially after the restoration of democracy in 1991. In the last three

years, it has exceeded 7 percent per annum, making Bangladesh's growth among the top ten countries globally. Per capita income has increased by 2.5 times over the last 25 years. National income is, in internationally comparable prices, USD 687 billion (at purchasing power parity), making it the 32nd largest economy in the world, the same size as the UAE and Vietnam.

Because Bangladesh invested significantly in agriculture and rural development and adopted employment-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing, growth has been comparatively inclusive. While there was an initial increase in inequality after growth accelerated in the early 1990s, the Gini coefficient of consumption, a widely used measure of economic inequality, has been steady around 0.33. By that measure, there is greater economic equality in Bangladesh than in India, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

What made these remarkable achievements possible? There are other factors, but most of all, it was the Liberation War that made these achievements possible.

First, the Liberation War tremendously mobilised the energy and ambition of the people for creating a just, equitable society. The victory over a highly trained, well-equipped Pakistani army provided the courage to dream. Their pent-up energy built up during the nine months of war had its release in development efforts after the war. Bangladesh's now-famous non-governmental development organisations, including BRAC and Grameen Bank, were a direct outcome of the war.

Second, the victory liberated Bangladesh not only from a foreign, dictatorial, and ultimately genocidal rule, but also freed the people from the yoke of the feudal, oligarchic, and military-bureaucratic rule of Pakistan in 1971. The liberation created a much flatter and socially mobile society where there were no feudal lords, no oligarchs, or a powerful military-bureaucratic clique. Into this space, there rose Bangladesh's now-famous non-governmental organisations, a dynamic private sector, an experimental and development-minded state relatively less shackled by bureaucratic inertia, and a highly productive partnership among these three elements.

One outcome of this partnership is that Bangladesh became the birthplace of some of the most innovative development practices. These include the microfinance revolution that has spread across the world; oral saline to reduce diarrhea-related deaths; the brilliant success of integrated preventive health

care through better water and sanitation facilities, non-formal health workers, and the energetic implementation of the vertical immunisation programmes; the generic drug policy introduced in the 1980s. In education, the family stipend programme to promote secondary school attendance by girls has also become a model. Back-to-back letters of credit that allowed new entry into the ready-made garments industry, the community-based rural electrification programmes, inclusive and mobile banking and the more recent household solar panel dissemination programme have been other notable innovations.

Third, the victory in the Liberation War led to women's empowerment. Women became more educated as enrolment rose quickly, achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2010, aided by the rapid recruitment of female teachers who make up 60 percent of the primary school teachers. Women's greater reproductive rights under a proactive family planning programme led to a marked rise in contraceptive use by women from eight percent at the time of independence to over 62 percent recently, and a decline in the annual population growth to about 1.1 percent. Women became entrepreneurs and workers. Nearly half a million women now head non-agricultural enterprises. The female labour force participation rate now stands at 35 percent as in Sri Lanka, but well higher than in India or Pakistan. At present, almost 20 million women make up one-third of the labour force.

Fourth, the liberation gave birth to both a small-farmer-based green revolution and a dynamic, modern private sector that was virtually non-existent at independence time. Farmers tripled cereal production laying the foundation of the economy. Ready-made garments manufacturing and exports then transformed the economy as their exports grew from a mere USD 32 million or 4 percent of Bangladesh's exports in 1983 to an estimated USD 30 billion, 84 percent of exports and almost half of manufacturing GDP. Bangladesh today is a ready-made garments exporting powerhouse second only to China.

Private-sector industries such as food processing, pharmaceuticals, leather and jute textiles, light engineering, construction, finance, and information technology-based services have also flourished. Although incipient, Bangladesh now exports more than 1,400 non-garment items, including ships exported to Europe, Asia, and Africa. Information technology, mobile phone, and Internet

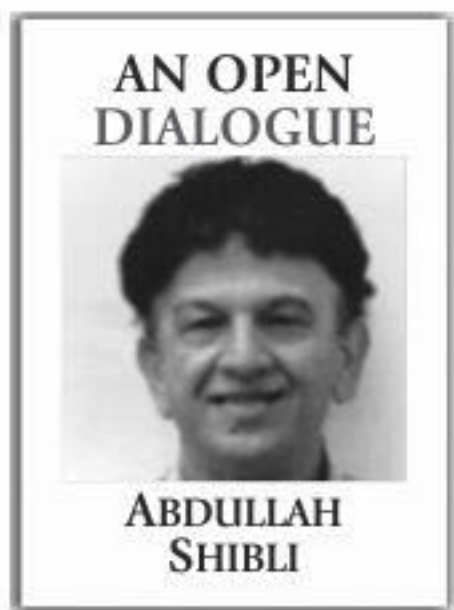
connectivity have grown explosively to boast about 141 million mobile phone users.

Bangladesh's democratically elected governments and a more curious and less elitist civil service were another gift of the Liberation War. Their sound economic management kept deficits and inflation rates low and real exchange rates competitive. Governments invested effectively in human development, rural infrastructure, and, somewhat late, in large-scale infrastructure. The increase in rural access to electricity from about 5 percent of the people at independence time to nearly 70 percent has been critical. Road density in rural areas is relatively high. The annual development programme has quadrupled to over USD 20 billion since the current government took office, among other things tripling electricity capacity to 16,048 megawatts today. The government also oversees some of the most extensive safety net programmes among developing countries, ranging from government pensions, employment programmes, and community-based cash and food transfer programmes targeted to the elderly, women and children.

With the right policies and implementation, Bangladesh stands poised to become a rapidly growing middle-income country and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. As in the past, Bangladesh will face significant challenges. These include the need to diversify the economy from its excessive reliance on ready-made garments and moving to other manufacturing sectors where it is showing nascent competitive strength. Some urgent issues will need addressing, such as fragility in parts of the financial system and the significant anti-export bias of its trade tariffs. Governments will need to maintain their record of macroeconomic stability, raising investor confidence, and investing in infrastructure. Providing health care and high-quality education will be particularly important. Doing so will not only enable a well-trained people to work with advanced technologies and boost productivity, but it will also allow them to realise—in Amartya Sen's words—development as freedom. Bangladesh will then have lived up to the ideals of the Liberation War to build a just and equitable society.

Dr Ahmad Ahsan is Director, Policy Research Institute, Bangladesh, a former faculty member of the Economics Department, Dhaka University, and a World Bank economist. He can be reached at aa42@columbia.edu. This article is adapted from a longer article, "Celebrating Bangladesh's Development Journey: Reflections on Victory Day", which will be published in *Beaming Bangladesh*, a publication of the Bangladesh Embassy in the USA.

The urgent need for reforms at WTO



MC11, was a total failure, and leaders of the member countries ought to recognise two things. First of all, the issues should be resolved well in advance of a ministerial council meeting since they end up in shouting matches. Secondly, future negotiations need to be speeded up to save WTO from irrelevance. As one participant, Pascal Kerneis of European Services Forum, commented about MC11, "Clearly this organisation is not working well. There are countries that came here and clearly said in their speeches that they don't want to move their positions at all." Areas of contention include e-commerce, subsidies, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

There have been behind-the-scenes discussions in every major international summit on the urgency to reform the charter of WTO, which regulates annual merchandise trade worth more than USD 17 billion, to make it a more efficient and effective regulatory body. Unfortunately, progress has been very slow, and some members of WTO have resisted changes tooth and nail and jeopardised its existence. However, there is now a slight ray of hope as there is resurgence in support for a rules-based multilateral trading system with WTO as the regulator and arbiter.

The director-general of WTO, Roberto Azevêdo, is keenly aware of the demand for change and the urgency to thwart an outbreak of another round of tariffs, sanctions, quotas, and confrontations among the world's largest trading partners. Last September, he reassured the world that his organisation can change and it wishes to engage with member countries to "achieve reform in a range of areas, including its consensus-based decision-making process."

There are three broad areas where WTO is ripe for reform: enforcement of rules to ensure member compliance of its rules to counter market distortions, the dispute settlement mechanism, and creation of rules for e-commerce, technology transfers, and international investment. However, the existing "consensus rule," which allows a single country to exercise veto power, impedes any reforms. In addition, big countries such as the US and China have consistently defied existing rules. It is ironic, in this context, that the US trade representative Robert Lighthizer complained last year at MC11 that it was impossible to negotiate new rules while many of the current rules were not being followed. He also complained that WTO was losing its focus and becoming too litigation-oriented. However, US efforts to unilaterally fix this problem by delaying appointments to the arbitration body are damaging WTO.

Canada recently stepped up to the plate and invited a



A meeting of WTO members at the organisation's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

PHOTO: VALENTIN FLAURAUD/REUTERS

"small group of like-minded" trade ministers in October to a conference which it named the Ottawa Ministerial on WTO Reforms. Prior to the meeting, Canada released a proposal, called "Strengthening and Modernizing the WTO," and laid out some ideas to "modernize the WTO's rules to address 21st century trade practices involving digital trade, international investment, domestic regulations, state-owned enterprises, industrial subsidies and trade secrets."

The US and China were excluded but at a press conference following the talks, Jim Carr, Canada's Minister of International Trade Diversification, said the group will invite China and the US to join the discussion in future. He also announced that the group of 13 nations and EU will meet again in January 2019.

The agenda of the Ottawa meeting identified areas that need attention to strengthen WTO and make it more efficient. But, the Canadian proposal mentioned above also admits that due to resistance from members, "longer term deliberation will be required to make substantial improvements to the WTO and formally update its 23-year-old rule book."

The recently concluded G20 summit in Buenos Aires was expected to make some headway on WTO reforms as well as break the logjam in the US-China trade negotiations. Trump and Xi, Presidents of US and China, respectively, sat down over dinner to discuss some of the outstanding issues, and decided to suspend any tariff actions against each other for three months. However, it appears that very little has been achieved on the bigger issue of overhauling the WTO. The joint communiqué, "G20 Leaders' Declaration," is a testimony to the lack of progress in this area. In section 27, while it pays lip service to the role of international trade and investment as "important engines of growth, productivity, innovation, job creation and development," it fails to address any of the issues bedeviling the multilateral trading system. The section ends with more platitudes, stating: "The system is currently falling short of its objectives and

there is room for improvement. We therefore support the necessary reform of the WTO to improve its functioning. We will review progress at our next Summit." This undoubtedly indicates that the leaders have nothing to suggest as a concrete proposal. Few reform efforts have succeeded so far, and many are stuck, including talks on cutting agricultural subsidies, increasing market access, reforming rules on access to medicines, improving the WTO dispute system and liberalising trade in services.

The next G20 summit will be held in Osaka, Japan on June 28-29, 2019. While negotiators for US and China will be very busy over the next three months to give any attention to WTO, the rest of the world can expect, or even demand, that other members of G20 gather the determination to draft an agreement on WTO reforms and many outstanding items including elimination of subsidies, transparency, e-commerce, and technology transfer. Other areas that must be overhauled are WTO's monitoring and transparency functions and the dispute settlement process.

Let me end this note with two observations. Experience over the last decade has shown us that WTO reform can be accomplished only if its members are willing to give and take. To avoid gridlock, negotiators must change the uncompromising attitude on display in the past which resulted in the gridlock we repeatedly witnessed in previous talks. As the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu warned, "If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading."

Open trade increases social welfare. But, it creates gains for some and losses for others. To paraphrase Pascal Lamy, the former WTO chief, it is the role of clearly crafted domestic policies and systems to redistribute fairly the economic gains of free trade and properly cope with the social pains that it creates.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and Senior Research Fellow at International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank based in Boston, USA. His new memoir *Fairy Tales: Stories from My Life* will soon be published by Jonantik.