

Taking responsibility for Chawkbazar inferno

A step in the right direction

WE are glad that Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader has publicly stated that the government cannot avoid responsibility for the Chawkbazar tragedy. It is a refreshing change from what we usually witness in the aftermath of such incidents. It can only be hoped that officials will have the moral courage to take responsibility for what is obviously a serious lax in the implementation of safety measures that should have been implemented after the Nimtoli tragedy back in 2010. Like Nimtoli, the Chawkbazar incident has rekindled public demand that storing of chemicals be stopped in the area permanently.

Although the High Court (HC) had directed authorities to relocate all such warehouses from the old town following the Nimtoli tragedy, little has been done to that effect over the last nine years. The court had asked the probe committee to identify unauthorised buildings, warehouses and factories where chemicals and other flammable or petroleum products were stored. It is now obvious that the directives were not taken seriously enough. Had they been, the people of Chawkbazar would not have had to go through the trauma of losing their loved ones to a deadly fire. Taking responsibility would mean authorities revisit the HC directives issued back in 2010 and take measures to stop the storage of these flammable items from the vicinity of not just Chawkbazar, but the old town in general. We have to start treating public safety seriously and preventing the recurrence of another Nimtoli or Chawkbazar will entail continuous monitoring by authorities to stop the hoarding of such materials in the future in congested and residential areas like the old town, which is also home to a sizeable chunk of Dhaka's populace.

India and Pakistan, hold your fire

Revert to the path of peace

IT is with great concern that we are witnessing a dangerous escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan after the deadly Pulwama attack, which claimed the lives of more than 40 Indian security personnel in the Indian-controlled Kashmir. We condemn the attack and view it as a mindless act of violence that only serves to make it more difficult to attain peace in the valley. We also offer our condolences to the families of those who lost their lives.

India's reaction of wanting to give a 'befitting' reply after such a deadly attack is understandable given Pakistan's obvious involvement in Kashmir but blaming Pakistan directly requires more evidence. At the same time, we have seen an inadequate response from Pakistan to address India's longstanding concerns about allowing terrorist groups to find asylum within its territory. It is alleged not only by India but also many other international entities that a section of the country's establishment, hostile to the idea of peace, harbours armed groups that carry out cross-border terrorist acts. Pakistan must commit to do more in dismantling these non-state actors.

On the other hand, the nationalist elements in India have, since the attack, created an environment in which anything less than revenge would be deemed unacceptable. Yet this is the last thing that should be contemplated. The most prudent thing for India to do would be exercise restraint and not fall into the trap of a war, which would destabilise not just both the countries but also the entire region.

India should also protect Kashmiri civilians and those voicing peace from nationalist jingoists. The government's silence over the attacks on these people would further alienate them.

We call on leaders of both the countries to rein in their threat of war which will only bring grief on both sides and escalate hostilities further. We request both members of Saarc to use all other peaceful channels besides war to resolve the issues that have led to such tensions. Both parties should make sure that the interests of the Kashmiri people's are taken into account.

The irony of an appointment



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

ON February 18, while raising a supplementary question in parliament, Jatiya Party leader Fakhru Imam offered a glimpse into two of the great paradoxes of today. Using expressions that are bound to enter the local political lexicon, he questioned the wisdom of appointing former shipping minister Shajahan Khan as the head of a committee that will

advise the government on how to bring discipline to the road transport sector: How practical, he asked, is it to expect "Bodi to curb narcotics trade or Shajahan Khan to curb road accidents?". He was, of course, referring to the chequered career of Shajahan Khan as a transport leader which has earned him quite a bit of notoriety. Imam's reference to Abdur Rahman Bodi—the former Awami League MP who was reportedly tapped to assist in the government's war on drugs despite his reputation for leading a sprawling drug empire in Cox's Bazar—was only meant to accentuate the absurdity of such engagements.

Clearly, Shajahan Khan didn't like to be compared to Bodi—he said as much in his reaction—nor would Bodi have liked the comparison had he been in a position to respond. But both men share more commonalities than they would like to admit. Both are proud, outspoken and quite sensitive to how they are viewed. Both have their political capital built on values and assets that are not political. Their rise in power, headline-grabbing gaffes and failures, and eventual ascension to such "feel-good" advisory roles, which almost seem like a "reward" for their past deeds, present a moral quagmire that is hard to ignore. It also represents the inconsistencies between what is expected and the reality in how the State functions, and questions its ability to respond to the most urgent concerns of the citizens.

In his defence against the accusations brought in parliament, Shajahan Khan was quite persuasive. He enumerated a list of his achievements and demanded that Imam's comment be expunged. It is not a new phenomenon for him to try to rewrite his legacy, but this time it was particularly brazen. However, his words can only be of limited reassurance given his track record. And it is his record—not his account—which should matter while evaluating his fitness to serve in a position so important for public safety, a fact apparently ignored by the administration. This much was clear from the flawed justification given by Obaidul Quader, the road transport and bridges minister, which reminds one just how hard it must be to speak for a colleague who has courted controversy on a near-regular basis.

Obaidul Quader's argument pivots on Shajahan Khan's "experience" in dealing with matters related to the transport sector. Taken at face value, this line of argument would be reassuring. However, the experience of the man in question was gathered not in any official capacity as a public servant, but as a union leader representing the interests of transport owners/workers, which often put him on a collision course with his own government and even the general public. As far as past records go, he was not part of the solution—he was part of the problem. And his experience has evidently benefitted him more as a person than it did the citizens who he had promised to serve.

According to his affidavit submitted to the Election Commission before the December 30, 2018 election, during his ten years as shipping minister and a



ILLUSTRATION: SADAT

unionist, Shajahan Khan's wealth had increased by a staggering 93 percent while his wife's wealth increased by 12 percent. Even a decade ago, the couple didn't have any house or land in their names in Dhaka. Now, they have houses and plots in Lalmatia, Badda, Meradia and Purbachal areas. Clearly, he has lived his life in the fast lane, aided in no small part by his "superior" experience and the immunity of his ministerial portfolio. During the same period, many people died or were injured as a consequence of his failure to regulate our chaotic roads as well as decisions that he, as a leader of the transport sector, was either privy to or had a part in making. This glaring incongruity is what prompted the road safety campaigners to call his selection in the 15-member advisory committee "laughable"—for lack of a more politically correct word.

It's hardly surprising that the decision has brought renewed attention to his unresolved credibility issues. But the administration appeared unmoved by the conflicting nature of his representation and its relation to the task at hand. In response to Fakhru Imam's reference to Shajahan Khan's now-infamous smirk, which he reportedly gave following the death of two students in road accidents last year, the road transport and bridges minister said: "I would not dwell on a person. I would not like to see what a polite smile in a man's past caused what trouble." Well, the past matters, and this particular "polite smile" happened to ignite a nationwide student protest, paralysed all major cities, thoroughfares, and educational institutions for days on end, and led to furious calls for his resignation.

When it comes to calls for resignation, few politicians are as familiar with the experience as Shajahan Khan. The report about his appointment published in this paper carried an infographic on some of the occasions when he made headlines for his inappropriate comments and unbecoming actions,

much to the consternation of the public. On one occasion, in August 2011, he said a driver does not need to be educated to get a driving licence: "If a driver can sign his name, can read traffic signs and signals, can tell a cow from a goat and has 'good' driving skills, what's the problem in giving him a licence?" On another occasion, his involvement with a transport strike generated front-page news. The strike, which he defended publicly, held the whole country hostage for days because of a court verdict that gave life sentence to a driver over the deaths of director Tareque Masud, cinematographer Mishuk Munier, and three others.

I remember writing an article titled "Oh! Be careful little tongue what you say!" after that, lamenting his penchant for inflammatory sound bites and the unbridgeable gap between the wavelength on which he functions and the wavelength on which most ordinary citizens do. That was about two years ago. Since then, he was criticised for conflicts of interest between his roles as a minister and as a representative of the transport owners/workers. There's no telling how impartial he can be now that he has been relieved of the burden to "act" ministerial.

That said, one can also question the very existence of this committee, given how such committees fared in the past. Despite what Obaidul Quader believes about the useful inputs that the committee can provide, overriding any personal bias that a member may have, "it's hilarious that those who have created the problems in the sector have been given the responsibility to solve them," said Prof Moazzem Hossain, former director of the Accident Research Institute at Buet. Besides Shajahan Khan, according to *The Daily Star* report, five other members of the committee are also involved with transport organisations, who will no doubt hold sway over all its decisions. The irony of the whole spectacle is obvious.

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Ekushey as a 'Bideshi'

AYAT SHAH

IT'S the fifth year that I've lived in Bangladesh, and the fifth opportunity to celebrate a day that makes me feel I am a part of something so much greater than myself. I'm an American, and I originally hail from Srinagar, Kashmir. I knew nothing of this land, its customs, societal norms, or much less, of its language when I first set foot on Bangladeshi soil half a decade ago. I came here to pursue medical school, knowing that studying medicine in this subcontinent meant getting to

couldn't be an active part of the society in which I lived. So, I tried really hard to fit in. I'd always been socially awkward in general and disliked putting myself out there, but at the time, I did it because I had to in order to survive in the system. The response from my fellow Bengalis was overwhelmingly welcoming.

I found Bengalis to be so easy to get along with and suddenly began hearing more Bengali than English in this new setting. I caught on to the language pretty easily. I found it easy to pay attention to the way in which people spoke. This included their tone of voice, their gestures, and the select group of

told my hostel room's *khala* to do black magic on the room, though I'd actually meant to ask her to sweep it up. I said: "Khala, roome jaadu koren" instead of "jharoo daen". During classes, teachers frequently used the phrase: "jai hok", and this reminded me of the Hindi song "Jai Ho" by A. R. Rahman. I was so puzzled as to why my teachers were using this phrase in such a casual, calm manner when the song was known to be upbeat.

In any case, it took me until my third year of college to enjoy a steady handle of the Bengali language. My curriculum was in English, but I had to interact with patients in their own native tongue. As

language. For someone who was halfway across the world and away from the comfort of a home and family, I had very little to hold on to. I often let my anxieties get the best of me, and the journey to get to where I am today necessitated not knowing if what I was doing would ever lead me somewhere.

What I now realise is that learning to speak Bengali served as a portal for my self-growth. The fact that it was an easy language to speak and that it was, further, spoken by warm, welcoming individuals, made me feel like I belonged. I took this feeling of self-belonging that I'd been searching for, and ran with it. I came here when I was 17 years old, and am now 22. I owe so much of who I am today to this country, and the language that made me feel like I belonged.

Medical school ended roughly two months ago. During my final professional exam, I had to speak to my patients in full-fledged Bengali. They complimented me for it and said they'd pray I turn out to be a good doctor. I thanked every single one of them, and my face beamed.

I very recently began an internship with UNHCR Bangladesh. Two days ago while at work, a colleague stopped me and said, in Bengali: "You speak Bengali very well, and I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for speaking Bengali although you are a foreigner. Bangladesh fought for this right, and it makes me so happy to see a foreigner honouring that". I stood there marvelling at the magnitude of this compliment and could only manage to say: "Dhonnobad".

For having such an admirable and unique movement which showed the world the sacredness of one's mother tongue; I say thank you to you, Bangladesh. My heart swells with pride knowing that a United Nations-declared holiday was inspired by the earnest desire of a people to speak their own language: a language that I myself was so earnest to learn during my initial days here. I see my conviction to learn Bengali comparable to that of Bengalis to speak and preserve Bengali, and this gives me a unique sort of peace.

Ayat Shah is a recent medical school graduate who values creativity, vlogging, and is passionate about mental health.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

witness unique patient cases and being able to acquire a very sharp clinical eye.

My state during the first few weeks in medical school was the epitome of desperation. I attended lectures in which the PowerPoints were in English, but had professors who spoke in Bangla. I sat there during the initial few months wondering if a "practical medical experience" was truly worth my perpetual confusion. I drowned in self-doubt and disliked the fact that I

words others use to express themselves. I found it easy to mimic these things before I caught on to the actual words of the Bengali language. It wasn't long before I felt comfortable enough to hold conversations in Bangla, only using English as a crutch when I couldn't say what I needed to after a sufficient struggle.

During my adjustment phase, I made a plethora of hilarious speaking mistakes (and still do, from time to time). I once

the days passed, this act of speaking Bengali grew to be something very personal to me. Surprisingly, I wasn't ever laughed at for trying to speak it. No matter if I was in class, the market place, or interacting with a patient, no one, *no one*, in the slightest ridiculed me for my desperate efforts. It was clear that I was trying really hard to be something that I so apparently wasn't. But Bengalis around me took my effort seriously and actually wanted me to master their

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Accumulating wealth cannot be the goal of life

The issue of wealth accumulation by a handful of people has gained traction all over the world. I would like to bring up the three final wishes made by Alexander the Great, the famous ancient Greek king, at his deathbed.

Knowing for certain that he would die soon, Alexander, one of the most successful military commanders ever born, told his subordinates, "My first wish is to have my physician bring my coffin home alone. My second wish is scatter the gold, silver, and gems from my treasure-house along the path to the tomb when you ship my coffin to the grave. My final wish is to put my hands outside the coffin."

When his bewildered advisers asked him why he had these wishes, Alexander replied that he wanted everyone to be reminded of three lessons that he had learnt. Firstly, no doctor or physician can really save one from the clutches of death. The second wish was to tell people that not even a fraction of the riches that he had accumulated would go with him. His third wish was to let people understand that he came into the world with empty hands and he would leave it also with empty hands.

Alexander the Great died at the age of 33, but in that short span of life he understood the real meaning of life and hoped that others would also understand.

Nur Jahan, By e-mail