

Losing the only roof over their heads

Eviction drives without relocation and rehabilitation projects will only make the poor poorer



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

NO STRINGS ATTACHED
THE image is all too familiar, so much so that it is almost forgettable: A woman wailing amongst debris that once was what she called her home. To many passersby, it was one of the countless slums where people who are not particularly welcome had come to stay. They are those who have fled after rivers took away their homesteads or who could no longer find work in their village. They came to the city with dreams of earning enough to have a decent life, maybe send their children to school so they could get good jobs and hopefully never have to live in a "bosti" (slum) again. And for most of them, work was readily available—in households, factories, ply rickshaws, carry heavy loads or build mansions they would never live in. But at least they had a roof over their heads and a space they called home. Yet one frightening night, that tiny piece of security was bulldozed into a pile of rubbish.

Slums are demolished regularly and not much fuss is made of it because of various reasons. Non-slum-dwellers don't find anything wrong with a city being "cleaned of those dirty shanties where all kinds of nefarious activities take place—drug trade, sex trade and the like." From the government's perspective, the slums are illegal occupation of state-owned land and so there is nothing unlawful about evicting a few thousand people who shouldn't have been living on this land in the first place.

In all these narratives, what is missing is the fact that we are talking about lives here—of people who contribute to the economy and to the wellbeing of their compatriots in a multitude of ways. They may seem invisible to many but they are the ones who clean our homes, take care of our children, and drive us in rickshaws, CNG-run three-wheelers and buses. They are the ones who have helped build an RMG industry worth more than USD 30 billion. They are the ones

who risk their limbs and lives building flyovers and high-rise luxury apartments and offices. They all have families; they all have stories to tell and dreams of a better life somewhere in the future.

Yet while we slept peacefully in our beds on February 19, the monstrous bulldozers had started their ruthless demolition in a slum in Bhashantek, mercilessly crushing to a pulp the only possessions of 10,000 people. Saleha (not her real name) who had lost her little hut that she had "bought" from

out—everyone was in the same boat. Most of all, there was nowhere to go.

Desperate searches for alternative accommodation went in vain for many of the 10,000 residents of this area. Either they had already been taken by those who had anticipated the eviction or they were far beyond their means. But why did they wait till the last minute to look when they knew it was inevitable?

This is where the story of eviction begins.

"because our landlords gave us assurances that they would not do this and that they would talk to the people in government so they would allow us to stay a few more months at least." The "landlords" were either politically connected themselves or had bought the land from politically influential individuals. Little shacks were then rented out for Tk 4,000-6,000 or upwards depending on how much could be extracted. This explains the electricity and water that were

evicted from another slum in a nearby area.

I saw Saleha after almost a week after that horrific night, her thin body even more emaciated than before, her face tired with fatigue and grief. It is the same grief I saw in Zulekha who cried when she told me how her children's textbooks and guidebooks had been destroyed in the eviction drive; and in Beena, who had to give up her prized fridge and keep it in a relative's house, perhaps indefinitely. "My children (aged 2 and 4) keep asking me, 'Ma, when will we go home?' I don't know what to say."

The eviction drive had come at the worst time for all the SSC candidates in the slum whose world turned upside down as they were preparing for and taking the most important exam of their lives. "They had promised they would demolish the slums after our exams," says 14-year-old Sharmin who is taking the exam this year. "But they didn't care. No one came to see us or talk to us, not even the media. If we fail the exam or do really badly, will anyone realise that it's because our homes were being destroyed and we couldn't study because we were helping our parents to pack up?"

Unfortunately, there is no one to answer such painful questions. Because honestly, it's true, no one really cares. It is ironic that there is so much talk about projects to alleviate poverty but there are no projects to relocate thousands of people who have been forced to come to the city fleeing landlessness and joblessness, just to survive. The eviction drives may be perfectly legitimate as this is acquired land being recovered. But if it means crushing homes, precious possessions of poor people, livelihoods, disrupting children's education and destroying communities that have organically grown in the area, the whole idea of "cleaning up" urban spaces becomes a meaningless, ruthless exercise that leaves the poor poorer. Slum-dwellers are not aliens—they are our fellow city dwellers. Many of them are voters. Does not the state have a responsibility to ensure their right to a roof over their heads?

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Senior Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.



Thousands of people were evicted in a drive by National Housing Authority in the capital's Bhashantek slum on February 19.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

her landlord describes the tragic scene: "All our things were just crushed under those machines. People's tables, chairs, mattresses, steel almirahs, even fridges that some had managed to buy—everything. Some were just dumped into the swamp." And all night long, Saleha, her husband and their three young daughters sat under the open sky guarding whatever belongings they had managed to salvage as there was no one to help them get their things

A report in this daily quotes an official of National Housing Authority who said that in 1970 the government acquired the land and since then it had been "grabbed and used illegally by locals." Apparently, although several notices were given, the slum-dwellers did not vacate the area. Even the night before the drive, they had asked the people to vacate but they did not believe that it would actually happen. "We didn't believe it," says Saleha,

"managed" in some of the slums. Saleha, who cooked on a mud stove, had her own latrine which she had installed. The hut she lived in used to be in a swamp propped up by bamboo sticks and plagued by mosquitoes. It wasn't much of an accommodation but it was her own place; she had "bought" it from her landlord, oblivious to the fact that even he did not legally own that area. Now she has nothing—just like 10 years ago when she had been

Remembering a devoted civil servant

SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

DR Md Rafiqul Islam, a senior member of BCS (customs) cadre, and a former member, National Board of Revenue, who topped the list of successful BCS examinees (1981 batch), passed away this February 8 due to a cardiac arrest. He was 65.

A year ago, Rafique attended the condolence meet of the late Ranjit Biswas, another colleague of ours who, like him, met with an untimely death. Rafique spoke on that occasion without knowing that he was destined to follow Ranjit soon.

Throughout his life, Rafique had been academically brilliant; he was a meritorious student of economics and later earned his PhD from Russia after independence. He got further higher education in economics from Harvard. A university in England offered him an honorary doctorate degree for various research-oriented articles published in celebrated professional journals. Not only that, Rafique's outstanding performance in training programmes of the World Bank and IMF didn't go unnoticed either.

Hailing from a remote village of Kurigram, Rafique topped the list of successful candidates of the Superior

Posts Examination (now known as the BCS examination) held in 1979. He was awarded a gold medal for outstanding results. We had the chance to meet him as a colleague at the former Civil Officers' Training Academy where we received civil service foundation training based on a new comprehensive curriculum under the dynamic guidance of Khalid Shams.

Rafique exhibited a high level of professionalism in the customs arena. He quickly made a name for himself in the customs cadre despite the prevalence of an unfriendly work environment. As a results-oriented revenue official, he was firmly determined to raise the volume of the country's internal resources and thus contributed substantively to the growth of the public exchequer. He worked hard to meet the target stipulated by successive governments. Public interest and welfare was what mattered to him most.

Rafique was once the head of Customs Academy, Chattogram, where he went on to prove himself to be an effective training professional. He played a role in restoring discipline and dignity in this academy which had become devoid of these qualities for quite long. He found the institution to



Dr Md Rafiqul Islam

be technically weak, and thus he made relentless efforts to update the old curricula by introducing new subjects and methods of instruction, thanks to which customs officials' performance dramatically improved.

Unlike the typical ivory-tower leader, Rafique's motto was "Management by Walking Around" (MBWA). As a supervisor, he was committed to ensuring punctuality at the workplace; it is reported that he

even went to the extent of standing at the academy's entrance to check attendance of officials. Punctuality and modesty were the core virtues he nurtured and practised. Being the perfectionist that he was, Rafique always used to keep a checklist in his pocket before beginning the day's work, and it had even turned into a joke for some of those who treated work casually. But Rafique hardly ever expressed a feeling of contempt towards his colleagues.

Throughout his professional career, Rafique unfortunately faced harassment frequently because of misjudgment by the authorities. At a certain point during his service, he was posted to Benapole Customs House where he worked with utmost vigour and commitment. When his promotion to the post of NBR chairman was due, he respectfully declined the prestigious position. Apparently, while working at Benapole, he got in the way of some individuals—relatives of a few political high-ups belonging to the earlier regime—who were involved in smuggling. These smugglers threatened him by saying that his promotion would be halted. Rafique did not yield to their undue pressures and so was made officer-on-special-duty (OSD) for

three years.

Rafique embodied a unique blend of romanticism and pragmatism. He was gifted with a poetic and literary bent of mind. During his years in university, he wrote a book of poems, *Sonali Sottya*, which reflects his sentiments about a pretty lady who, as he assumed, mirrored the serene rural setting of his village home that he loved and missed most.

Rafique's wife Rownaque Jahan Shipra, who was with him for almost four decades, claims that although Rafique would mostly remain busy with work, he was an ideal husband and a caring, affectionate and responsible father to his only son throughout his life. Later, at the fag end of his career, he felt that he was being deprived of the due rank or position he deserved; he became depressed and non-communicative. He felt that he was destined to see a perpetual gap between his aspirations and achievements. To those who knew and loved Rafique, however, he has taught them how to stay resilient and disciplined in life, and accept in good humour that which is unacceptable.

Dr Syed Naquib Muslim is a retired secretary of the Government of Bangladesh, and now teaches at a private university.

QUOTABLE Quote

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK
INDIAN SCHOLAR, LITERARY THEORIST, AND FEMINIST CRITIC

Nationalism can only ever be a crucial political agenda against oppression. All longing to the contrary, it cannot provide the absolute guarantee of identity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Pathfinder launcher
- 5 Old PC monitors
- 9 Last letter
- 11 Enlists again
- 13 Rat's home
- 14 Like Poe tales
- 15 Yale student
- 16 Underground conduit
- 18 Choir members
- 20 Bushranger Kelly
- 21 Insurance seller
- 22 Pvt.'s superiors
- 23 Wrestling need
- 24 Farm father
- 25 Bender
- 27 Humidor item
- 29 Series-ending

DOWN

- 1 Attendance count
- 2 Activist Bloomer
- 3 Seamstress's need
- 4 Long time
- 5 Salad green
- 6 Film unit
- 7 Hypothetical computer
- 8 Harpsichord's cousin
- 10 Silver, in heraldry
- 12 Canary chow
- 17 Trickery
- 19 Equipment
- 22 Long story
- 24 Freed of suds
- 25 Lab work
- 26 Rembrandt, for one
- 27 Animation frame
- 28 Control
- 30 Manners
- 31 Holds back
- 33 Words of approximation
- 37 Last letter, in London

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

WHAT'S THAT?! THERE'S A DRONE HOVERING OVER ME

IT WAS FLYING BY AND GOT INTERESTED IN THE TV SHOW I WAS WATCHING

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WHAT'S UP? MOM WANTS OUR ROOMS SO CLEAN WE CAN EAT OFF THE FLOOR.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

EXCUSE ME WHILE I GO BARP.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	K	I	P	F	L	A	S	H
C	O	N	G	A	R	A	N	T
A	R	E	A	S	A	N	G	E
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A	M	O	R	E	O	C	I	E
T	I	R	E	D	N	O	I	S
S	E	E	K	S	P	O	T	S