

Forgery scam for building approvals

Strict monitoring and enforcement needed

THE Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB) stated in a press conference on April 8 that its members have discovered around 2,000 incidents in which signatures of architects were forged. Despite written complaints to Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) to take legal action against buildings that had taken approval on the basis of forged signatures, there has been no response from the regulatory body. What this means of course is that we have thousands of buildings that could potentially be termed “risky” as there is every scope of them being built in violation of both the building code and fire safety measures.

Rajuk is not the only agency that has failed to play its role as a competent regulator. Building rules in 2006 made it mandatory for builders to have measures for fire safety, environmental conservation, and universal access to the building. The rules state that new building owners need to obtain occupancy certificates that are supposed to be given after inspection, but only a fraction of building owners actually have them. That means the bulk of new buildings that come up obtain these certificates by resorting to graft. There is no other option but to make occupancy certificates mandatory, as there is no alternative to better monitoring and enforcement of codes and laws. Rajuk needs better trained manpower as does the fire service department but these are long-term solutions. In the short-term, risky buildings need to be identified and retrofitted. But most importantly, corruption has to be checked at the regulatory level if we want no repetition of the FR Tower incident.

Honouring a true hero

The government should take responsibility of Sohel's family

WE are saddened by the premature death of Sohel Rana, the 25-year-old firefighter who saved many lives at the risk of losing his own during the Banani FR Tower fire on March 28. Sohel was critically injured during the rescue operation when he, along with his colleagues, was trying to take those trapped in the blaze to safety using a hydraulic ladder. At one point, he got stuck in the ladder after which the ladder folded injuring him severely; his stomach was punctured and one of his legs broken. Although he was taken to Singapore for better treatment, his injuries were so severe that after fighting for his life for 11 days, he eventually succumbed to his injuries.

A true hero, Sohel's life struggle began when he was a child. He worked on other people's land and did all kinds of laborious jobs to support his family during his school days. And when he got a job as a fireman in 2015, he used to send the lion's share of his salary to his family and was bearing the educational expenses of his three younger brothers.

We rarely come across people like Sohel Rana who prioritise their jobs and responsibilities towards society over anything else. And not only Sohel Rana but the entire team of the fire service made us proud during the devastating FR Tower fire. We have not forgotten Kaikobad, the man who died during the Rana Plaza disaster while trying to rescue a victim from under the rubble. But our responsibility towards these men should not simply end with us recognising them as heroes. To truly honour them, we should take the responsibility of their families. Now that Sohel Rana is no more, the government should make sure that his family does not have to go through economic hardship and his younger brothers can continue with their studies. That would be the most fitting way to honour Sohel Rana.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Who's watching over our schools and madrasas?

The news of a female madrasa student in Feni being set on fire because she refused to lift the sexual assault case against the principal of the institution is extremely shocking. The teenager, with 75 percent burns, is now struggling to hold on to dear life at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

This is not the first time that madrasa students have faced physical abuse—although this case is particularly noteworthy due to its sheer brutality. So, why is it that nothing is being done to provide a safer environment to students—both in madrasas and other educational institutions? These incidents happen in urban areas as well; however, they are perhaps more common in rural pockets of the country. We barely hear about the horrific abuse faced by children in madrasas and schools all over the country, unless they somehow make the news. Girls, in particular, are vulnerable to sexual abuse and unfortunately, the culture in most parts of the country is such that the environment is simply not conducive for girls to freely speak out against sexual abuse. The student in Feni who was set on fire by four unidentified persons is paying the price for voicing herself. It is disappointing that no one in a position of authority in the government talks about the dangers of misogyny being internalised by children at an impressionable age in madrasas and schools.

We simply cannot give these so-called educational institutions a free hand. A system of strict monitoring should be in place and inspection teams and complaint cells should be set up all throughout the country.

Tamanna Khan, by email

The fall of Baghdad 16 years ago

A moment that defines the events now shaping our world

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THREE weeks into the invasion of Iraq, coalition forces led by the US army entered Baghdad and formally occupied it on April 9, 2003. The city's infrastructure was seriously damaged. The Al-Yarmouk Hospital in the south received about 100 new patients every hour at the time of fighting. And many treasures at the National Museum of Iraq—from ancient Mesopotamia and early Islamic culture—were stolen or broken while the Iraqi National Library and National Archives housing thousands of manuscripts from civilisations dating as far back as 7,000 years were burned down and many of its items destroyed.

Like it was an attack on the past, the invasion, from when it occurred, has also proved to be an attack on the future of civilisation. But to most Iraqis, that was obvious from the get-go.

In his eyewitness account of “liberated” Iraq in May 2003, Radio France Internationale's Tony Cross recalled seeing daily protests against the Americans. Of witnessing western boys of 18-25 years-old standing with their tanks and advanced military equipment, looking fearful (and helpful sometimes) of the host population whose language none of them understood. The most interesting contradiction he points to was between the widely held belief among Iraqis that there was a Zionist-American plot to wipe out their history and subdue them through prolonged occupation, versus a 23-year-old US marine's statement that, “I talked to a few Iraqis yesterday and some of them said that they didn't really like us being here. But we liberated them, so I hope they appreciate it.”

Years later, ordinary people in the west still don't understand the true nature of the horror that it brought to Iraq. In an April 2013 poll by ComRes supported by Media Lens, 44 percent of people estimated that less than 5,000 Iraqis had died since 2003, while 59 percent believed that fewer than 10,000 had died—out of 2,021 respondents. The more likely estimate, according to most independent sources, is in excess of one million.

In 2010, WikiLeaks' disclosure of 391,832 US army field reports of the Iraq War from 2004 to 2009 exposed that the army itself recorded 109,000 deaths among which 66,081 were civilians. Aided by these documents, Iraq Body Count, which has compiled the most comprehensive record of deaths caused by the war, confirmed the death toll to have exceeded 150,000 in 2010 with roughly 80 percent of them being civilians.

The leaks moreover revealed

information about the torture of Iraqis, including by British forces. Adding to the worldwide condemnation that followed Seymour Hersh's disclosure on the gruesome and humiliating torture carried out by American soldiers on Iraqis in Abu Ghraib. In his 2004 report published by *The New Yorker*, Hersh had earlier shed light on a 53-page report by Major General Antonio Taguba, who wrote that “between October and December of 2003 there were numerous instances of ‘sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses’ at Abu Ghraib. That included: “Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape; allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being

government to overreact by increasing paranoia of an imminent coup, and use that to get Islamic extremists to act against the Syrian government.

And also in Libya, through similar destabilising efforts, followed by more direct intervention which overthrew its government and created a quagmire in what was the wealthiest country in all of Africa before the 2011 NATO intervention—a country where less people lived below the poverty line than in the Netherlands, where there is now a thriving slave market according to the UN.

As former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi warned prior to him being overthrown by NATO—and sodomised with a bayonet and killed by extremist forces on live television—without a unified and stable Libya, there would be no one to control countless migrants from Africa and the Middle East from

explains, “wars are a result of lies”—lies such as, Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, Gaddafi is providing Viagra to his soldiers to rape women, Assad is attacking unarmed Syrian civilians, etc., all of which have now been proven untrue.

Third, had these lies been exposed early enough, there is a chance that all these wars could have been avoided, and millions of lives spared. However, as most mainstream media outlets became the “stenographer of great power”, as John Pilger describes it, opting to spread lies and propaganda, rather than tell truth to the public and report the facts, the exposure of these lies came too late.

Fourth, the public has entered a state of mind where they can repeatedly be lied into wars. Where through some form of mental gymnastics, they seem to convince themselves time and again that:



Statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled in Firdaus Square in downtown Baghdad on April 9, 2003.

PHOTO: GORAN TOMASEVIC/REUTERS

slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomising a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick, and using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.”

Such brutality naturally created resentment. And that resentment could just as well have inspired the formation of forces such as ISIS and their ferocious treatment of those they saw as their enemy or opponent.

Yet, it was as if no lessons were learned by western governments. Who used the same blueprint of exploiting lies and deceptions to concoct new wars. In the case of Syria, by fostering tensions between Shiites and Sunnis, to cause its

fleeing to Europe. And that is exactly what happened since, turning American political scientist Samuel Huntington's theory of Clash of Civilisation now into near reality.

So what should we make of the Fall of Baghdad 16 years ago, or the broader invasion and destruction of Iraq, which by now has clearly turned out to be one of the most important events of the 21st century?

One, that greed for power often causes leaders of powerful countries to lie their citizens into waging wars against less powerful nations. And given the sophistry of modern weaponry, those wars are now costlier in terms of destroying human lives than ever.

Two, this is especially true for democracies, where, as Julian Assange

“this time they are taking us to war for humanitarian reasons, not for greed or for power.” Giving the impression that they are suffering from some sort of mass mind-control. Which is the ultimate goal of good propaganda.

That is why it is so important for alternative sources to inform the public about the true nature of wars. To record and reveal the real history of events that shape our world and to counter propaganda with facts. Because if we are to learn anything from the Iraq War and its subsequent events, it is that: “If wars can be started by lies, peace can be started by truth.”

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The vicious maligning of a peaceful campaign

'Don't stand so close'—A message that should be loud and clear



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

THE tagline was very simple yet relayed a crucial message: “Ga Gheshe Daraben Na” (Don't stand so close).

Wearing t-shirts with this tagline printed on them in the front and the back, young women in Dhaka city have been trying to jumpstart a movement to protest rampant sexual harassment of women and girls in public transport. A photo showing two young women sporting such t-shirts while riding a bus went viral on social media.

It's a movement that we should all support, a movement which we expect everyone to support. And that is where it should have stopped.

But what happened after the release of this photo was simply distasteful. Some individuals decided to edit the tagline and replace it with some objectionable words laced with profanity to malign the peaceful campaign. Many people have criticised the movement using indecent language. I would like to ask these people: have you ever seen your face in the mirror? Do you have any idea what kind of trauma female passengers face while travelling in public transport, often on a regular basis?

We are all well-aware of Dhaka's public transport crisis; be it getting on a bus, tempo, or Laguna, it's always a struggle. The scenario is the same everywhere. People stand at the designated or undesignated stop hour after hour to simply catch a bus. When a bus arrives, everyone scrambles to get on it; some manage to get on the bus, and some simply hang on to the handle and go all the way to their destination



COURTESY: FACEBOOK

standing.

The first unpleasant “touch” a female passenger faces when getting on the bus is of the helper of the bus. In the guise of “assisting” her, he nonchalantly touches the female passenger. It is also quite common to see a male passenger slyly groping a female passenger, sometimes using his elbow or hand to get some sort of twisted, perverted pleasure out of this despicable act. This is very common, and it's a painful scene

to witness.

The fact is that female passengers have to travel by bus at a huge cost—all the while fighting a huge battle. The public transport system in Bangladesh is so poor and insufficient that travelling by such means can be a traumatic experience for a woman.

For those who are confused about why young women have chosen such an innovative way to protest sexual harassment in public transport, let's

look at the numbers. A recent study by Brac revealed that a whopping 94 percent of female passengers faced verbal, physical and other forms of sexual harassment while commuting in public transport. So in a scenario as dreadful as this, what would be the most “decent” and peaceful way to protest sexual harassment in public transport?

Women have to travel and get around the city for education purposes, to earn a living or carry out daily errands for the household. This point, along with the fact that there are very few options of transport available to women, seems to have been lost on many who are asking, “Why do women get on buses if they don't want to be touched?” First, women don't owe anyone an explanation as to why they are using public transport. And second, they know the difference between an intentional and unintentional touch.

The “Ga Gheshe Daraben Na” tagline strategy is not meant for those who do not engage in indecent, perverted behaviour such as groping female passengers in public transport. But those who have directly or indirectly criticised or simply disagreed with the idea of this movement should consider what women go through when they are randomly touched by strangers and are disrespected.

Those who are busy editing this simple tagline and replacing the original text with unsavoury, vulgar words on social media are basically showing their true colours—exposing their ugliness.

The point is simple and straightforward: look at women as fellow human beings, and treat them with the respect they are entitled to.

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