

## Another den busted

### Vigilance cannot be let down

THE RAB raid on April 29 ended with two terrorists blowing themselves up in the Bosila area. Monday's raid of the militant hideout and the bomb going off in Gulistan area compel us to think whether these events are interrelated. Law enforcers, we are sure, will be looking into these incidents. In fact, the prime minister herself warned us in the aftermath of the carnage in Sri Lanka that we need to be on our guard against possible attacks and these incidents prove that the scourge of extremism has not been fully exterminated. The Islamic State (IS) has lost its base in Syria and there have been some indications that foreign fighters will try to get back to their respective countries. Some may also attempt to relocate to areas seeking safe sanctuary.

The IS has claimed responsibility for past attacks and the latest ones have demonstrated that the law enforcement and intelligence agencies need to intensify efforts to crack down on these extremist outfits and prevent their destructive activities. That is the lesson we learnt from our experience of the Holey Artisan attack back in 2016, although law enforcement agencies tell us that the IS has no cells in the country. While that may well be true, terror groups, like the one whose hideout was raided on April 29, are motivated by IS ideology. Hence, the level of preparedness must be sustained and counter-intelligence efforts, particularly human intelligence efforts, must be geared up to pre-empt the destructive activities of the extremists.

## Living in half-demolished buildings

### BIWTA must follow up on eviction drive

A photo published in this paper's front page on April 29 shows people still using a demolished building for residential purposes. The building in Chunaghat-Chawkbazar-Beribadh was demolished by the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) a month ago. With its crumbling roofs and caved in walls, the place is clearly not fit for living. That people are still residing there puts them at severe risk and is a disaster waiting to happen.

The buildings along the banks were demolished because they were illegal structures on occupied lands along the rivers—but does the BIWTA's responsibility end with demolishing the structures? What of ensuring that they are not reoccupied? And people living in these buildings had been doing so for a while; so, why was no initiative taken to rehabilitate them? Because, while these structures were built illegally, the administration was complicit too; how else were these structures built in the first place?

We hope that the BIWTA follows up on their drive, with the help of law-enforcing officials if needed, to keep these buildings empty. The buildings should be completely torn down so that they cannot be reoccupied. And lastly, the concerns of the people must be taken into account. It should be obvious that no one would willingly put their lives at risk by living in these half-broken structures, unless they were left with no other choice. Rehabilitation initiatives for these people must be considered—ultimately, that would benefit not only them, but the rivers as well.



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image" of the garment industry would be her top priority.

The Bangladesh garment industry needs a makeover, no doubt. Huq appears well-placed to spearhead reforms. To do so successfully, she needs to fix several of the industry association's missteps and firmly embrace workers' rights.

Huq promised to make Bangladesh famous for being "competitive" rather than the "cheapest." In this mission, she will not find better allies than labour advocates and workers. Brands, suppliers, and labour groups—and in fact, everyone—should unite to reject the notion that cheap equals competitive.

A growing number of rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, have publicly called out the duplicity of many global brands that say they support workers' rights but then drive down manufacturing prices without factoring in labour and social compliance costs. This practice thrives in environments where brands and suppliers do not need to accurately account for these expenses.

By treating labour costs as negotiable, global brands drive abusive cost-cutting measures that hurt workers and expose the brand to greater human rights risks in its supply chain. According to a 2016 International Labour Organization survey, the highest number of suppliers who felt compelled to accept orders below production costs came from Bangladesh. This directly affects workers' wages and other working conditions.

In 2016 and 2018, workers carried out two massive wildcat strikes protesting for better wages. Bangladesh authorities brutally suppressed these protests using excessive force, and brought fabricated criminal cases against those who weren't even at the protests. Thousands of poor Bangladeshi workers, mostly women, found themselves fired or blacklisted by factories for participating in protests.

We need to break this cycle of worker despair, government repression, and factory outbursts against protesting workers. But this requires two measures—first, trust-building, and second, a solution that combines innovative collaboration with technical know-how.

Winning workers' trust and seeing them as partners is important for the garment industry's stability. Huq should call on all garment factories to reinstate workers they fired without following fair procedures after the December 2018 protests, and compensate those who choose not to return. She should also publicly urge

all garment factory owners or managers who brought criminal complaints against protesting workers to seek out-of-court settlements wherever possible.

If Huq really wants to make Bangladesh famous for being "competitive," not the "cheapest," here are some thoughts.

Huq's vision for collaboration among smaller suppliers is important. She should champion other transformative collaboration that can bring about deeper rights reforms. This entails harnessing the combined force of initiatives that seek to fairly calculate labour costs, improve fire and building safety, freedom of association, and transparency. These include the legally binding Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety that includes brand responsibility to facilitate financing for fixing fire and building safety problems; Fair Wear Foundation's (FWF) labour costing tools; Better Buying's anonymous supplier ranking survey; Huq's transparent factory mapping exercise; Wage Indicator's transparent reporting of workers' wages; and the ACT initiative's efforts to begin working in Bangladesh.



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Huq should leverage Accord brands' responsibility to facilitate financing for remediation and promote the use of costing tools like those developed by Fair Wear Foundation. The FWF's labour costing tools allow manufacturers to accurately calculate wages and benefits and present it to brands. She should encourage all suppliers, including the ones where workers protested in 2016 and 2018 and those producing for Accord brands, to use FWF's Bangladesh costing tool.

Using such costing tools for Accord suppliers would be an important move toward ensuring that brands that say they are committed to workers' safety, freedom of association, and collective bargaining actually pay for

these protections.

Huq may consider initiating proposals for a new initiative like the Gajimu project in Indonesia, which interviews workers off-site and gathers factory information about wages and publicly reports on them. This would allow everyone to see whether these costing tools are having demonstrable impact on workers' wages.

All global brands sourcing from Bangladesh should partner with Better Buying, a new index for brand purchasing practices, inviting suppliers to rank their business practices anonymously. Human Rights Watch has called for all brands to at least summarise the scores they receive from Better Buying, indicating to consumers whether their practices are average, below, or above average.

Huq could encourage expanding the details included in a map of factories created by Brac, an international development organisation. These include indicating which factories are using tools to accurately assess labour costs; provide factory-wise wage information determined by a Gajimu-like project; and show which

factories have democratically elected unions and collective bargaining agreements.

These efforts will help set the stage for the Action Collaboration and Transformation initiative, which seeks to combine collective brand reform on purchasing practices with industry-wide collective bargaining agreements in Bangladesh.

Huq has at her disposal many tools to reshape Bangladesh's garment industry. She should use them to firmly advance workers' rights.

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# Where is the law and humanity for children working in domestic settings?



DIBARAH MAHBOOB

relatives claimed that this was a staged suicide because the girl had just gone back to work from a holiday. Protests broke out because no one could believe that a healthy girl, who was dropped off only the day before, could hang herself the next day. Although the employers have denied any wrongdoing, it is most likely another case of domestic worker abuse that led to the death of a child. A case was lodged.

In another recently reported case, child domestic worker Lamia, an 11-year-old, was frequently tortured by her employers, Ashraf Islam Chowdhury and his wife Sharmin Akhter, at their house in Barishal. Her employers used extreme measures to control her, like shaving her head so that her hair would not fall on food. The little girl was kept at her employer's house against her will. She was found attempting to escape from her building through the window, as her employers used to lock her up inside a room. Lamia was rescued in an unconscious state by the police, with a bruised face and injury marks all over her body.

Lamia and Boishakhi's cases are fresh reminders that there is much work to be done to protect these children. Children's engagement in domestic work is one of the worst forms of child labour and it is widespread in Bangladesh. According to a baseline survey (BBS & Unicef, 2006), there were approximately 400,000 child domestic workers aged between 6-17 years in Bangladesh, of which around 132,000 were in Dhaka city alone. This estimation makes domestic work by children the single largest hazardous child labour sector in the country. Almost 80 percent of child domestic workers are girls. As child domestic workers belong to the informal labour sector, they are often excluded from legal protection which makes them even more vulnerable. A Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) (2010) study on the situation of child domestic workers in Dhaka city showed that almost 73 percent of child domestic workers experienced physical abuse and a significant number of children (17 percent) were sexually abused.

It was only since 2015 that the government introduced the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy to recognise the need for a framework of rights of domestic workers. The policy acknowledged domestic work as a profession and set 14 years as the minimum age for light work whereas for heavy work, the age set is 18 years and above.

Even where legal protections do exist, they are often little known and poorly implemented. Domestic workers tend to be unrecognised, under-paid and unable to access complaint procedures, more so if they are children. The hidden nature of domestic work means it often escapes the reach of the law and heightens the risk of abuse of workers at the hands of their employers. Thus child domestic work, in terms of policymaking, remains

forms of child labour, according to the National Child Labour Survey report, published in 2015. Many of these children are frequently abused and exploited in many ways by different quarters, including his/her family even. Despite a number of policies and laws, children, particularly from the disadvantaged segment of the society, are being abused across all social classes, and it is completely socially accepted.

Firstly, there is an enormous body of research showing that hitting children turns them into angry, resentful adults with psychological and emotional problems. Entire generations are perpetually cultivated through violence and absent of access to basic rights such as their childhood and education.

Secondly, it also highlights a savage, sadistic tendency among the authoritarian



Child domestic work is a child labour issue, a children's rights issue, and gender issue.

PHOTO: STAR

highly neglected because of the relatively invisible nature of such work. They are often far from their families; controlled by their employer; invisible to public authorities; frequently deprived of basic rights, related social services, decent lodging and working conditions; and vulnerable to sexual harassment and mental and physical abuse. It is also fair to deduce that any official complaints or reports to the police from child domestic workers would be ignored. How often do we give credibility to what children have to say, especially those hailing from poor socioeconomic backgrounds?

Children from poor and marginalised communities in Bangladesh are victims of non-cooperation and social hostility. Approximately 1.2 million children in Bangladesh are working in the worst

class in question, long sustained by social acceptance since the era of the landowning zamindari class' reign. As the zamindars rose to socioeconomic prominence during British rule, so have the upper classes today retained the false yet deeply ensconced sense of supremacy over the working class people, including the latter's bodies. It is as if the trans-Atlantic slave trade culture from the days of European colonies had been carried on as legacies, from brutalising Africans on the basis of race to now dehumanising domestic workers, including children, on the basis of their socioeconomic standing.

In fact, given the historical links between domestic work and slavery and other forms of servitude, child domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to violations of fundamental rights at work.

Slavery is a system under which people are treated as property to be bought and sold, and are forced to work (Brace, 2004). One of the key issues distinguishing domestic work from other types of child labour is the 24-hour nature of the job (Black, 1997, p. 10). Typically, there are no specified hours or tasks allocated to child domestic workers. They do what their employer asks them to, at any time of day or night.

According to a study conducted by BSAF, the severity of torture on child domestic workers ranges from inhuman working hours with no rest to constant beatings and torture (such as hitting the head against the wall, branding lit cigarettes and hot metal objects against raw skin, etc.) while some child domestic workers have even been raped and as a result committed suicide ("A Desk Review on Child Labour in Domestic Work in Bangladesh", Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, December 2013). It is important to note that abuse need not be physical in order to amount to torture. Torture can also be of an economic or mental nature (from non-payment of wages to incessant verbal abuse and infliction of trauma) and therefore needs to be recognised and condemned all the same.

Child domestic work is a child labour issue, a children's rights issue, and gender issue. It is a child labour issue as it involves economic exploitation and hazardous working conditions. It is a children's rights issue because the nature and conditions of the work are unfavourable for child development. Finally, it is also a gender issue as it relates to sexual abuse, risk of sexual assault, and family perceptions about the limited value of children's education. Often the child domestic workers are girls, as their parents send them to work at domestic settings to save up for their dowry.

So, when are we going to finally begin legal and social movements to topple the cultural acceptance of inhuman treatment of children on the basis of their class of birth? On a social level, we must first begin to check our own privileges and each other's—discouraging one another to employ children in our homes. And even if we are, keeping each other in check—how humanely are we treating domestic workers, especially children? In Bengali culture, we shame one another into avoidance in many aspects. So, why don't we apply cultural tools to shame those who abuse child domestic workers?

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## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR

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## Goodbye, Mahfuz Ullah

We are saddened to hear that senior journalist Mr Mahfuz Ullah has passed away. He breathed his last in a hospital in Thailand on Saturday (April 27, 2019) morning at the age of 69.

Mr Mahfuz Ullah had contributed immensely to the field of journalism in the country. He was also a talented writer who had authored more than 50 books in Bangla and English, as well as edited a number of others. Mr Mahfuz Ullah's involvement in journalism can be traced back to his student days; he had been associated with popular weekly *Bichitra* since its inception in 1972.

Mr Mahfuz Ullah's death is a big loss for the nation as a whole. He will forever be remembered for his courage and for all the causes that he fought for. Because of his involvement with the movement against Ayub Khan's military rule, he was expelled from Dhaka College. He was also a pioneer of environmental journalism in the country and was the founder secretary general of the Centre for Sustainable Development.

Mr Mahfuz Ullah is a role model for journalists in the country. We deeply mourn his death and pray for his departed soul. He will be missed.

SM Imranul Islam Rajon

Senior Officer, Janata Bank Ltd, Dhaka



Mahfuz Ullah