

Why couldn't we protect Nurse Tania and other Nirbhayas?

Jute workers without pay for months

Release funds before Eid

IT is hard to imagine the plight of some 60,000 jute workers who have not been paid from anywhere between six and 12 weeks. Workers are starving and have had to resort to taking odd jobs in an effort to feed their families. This comes in the backdrop of broken promises made by the authorities about regularising their pay including the implementation of the last wage board passed in 2015. Unfortunately, while the eighth national pay scale has been implemented for most government offices and corporations, the same cannot be said for the 22 state-owned jute mills. The jute secretary states that salaries cannot be paid because funds have not been secured. That is not the fault of workers.

Thousands of workers have been agitating all over the country because they were promised the implementation of the new wage board in October last year. That never materialised because the jute ministry has not implemented the wage board; and what we understand from official sources, it may come into effect sometime next month. The crux of the problem is that implementing the new pay structure will result in Tk 8 crore in losses per day. Workers should not be made to suffer just because bad management and poor planning at various levels have failed to make the jute mills profitable. This situation cannot be allowed to prolong. Thousands of workers and their dependents cannot be pushed to the brink of starvation. Emergency budgetary allocations need to be made by the finance ministry to alleviate their plight.

Make migration safe for our workers

Workers' deaths in the high seas shocking

THE tragic death of 37 Bangladeshi workers in a boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea, on their way to Italy from Libya, is shocking. According to survivors, the Italy-bound boat had 51 Bangladeshis on board when it sank. This tragic incident has once again brought to light the fact that many transnational human trafficking gangs are openly operating in the country and luring people with the promise of a better future in many European countries. And after extracting huge amounts of money from the migrants, these gangs leave them in dangerous conditions in foreign countries where the migrants do not get the jobs they are promised and have to live in slave-like conditions.

In this tragic case also, the workers took this precarious journey out of sheer desperation—after facing a miserable situation in Libya in the last five months, where many of the victims were kept in a crowded jail-like condition. Also, the workers did not want to return home as they paid a hefty amount of money to the traffickers. Although Bangladesh has stopped sending workers to Libya considering the political situation in the country in 2014, some transnational human trafficking gangs in Bangladesh, in cooperation with their counterparts in Libya and other countries, reportedly continue to send workers there.

It is totally unacceptable that while our government has been claiming economic growth and development all the time, people are seeking greener pastures in countries far and wide and are forced to take risky journeys often ending in disaster. The government must take effective measures to address the issue of human trafficking. It must make all-out efforts to apprehend the trafficking gangs. Also steps must be taken to make our workers aware of the risks involved in such illegal migration, so that they do not fall prey to the traffickers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Protecting our biodiversity

Bangladesh is a country where various flora and fauna used to thrive. But in recent years, due to excessive population growth, poaching, overuse of natural resources, climate change and other reasons, our ecology is in danger. Many of our species are already extinct and numerous others are endangered. The Sundarbans is no exception.

The mammals of the forest are in the most critical condition. They need a spacious habitat which is diminishing every day due to excessive harvesting of the natural resources. The growth in human population is pushing such endangered species towards extinction. The aquatic environment too is being polluted by insecticides, industrial waste and so on. If this continues, this glorious forest would be reduced to a pitiful sight. Due to the interconnected food chain, other dependent animals will also be harmed, which will cause the entire ecosystem to suffer from imbalance, ultimately affecting the human dwellers of the vicinity. The government and the Forest Department of Bangladesh, who are already aware of this situation, should take proper steps to save the biodiversity of the Sundarbans. After all, it is our duty to protect it.

Md Salman Haider
 Department of International Relations
 University of Rajshahi



NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

EVERY time we read the word "rape" and "gang rape", we cringe with horror. Yet these two words keep coming up too often in our daily dose of nightmarish news. And the profiles of the victims are so widespread they could be anyone—an infant, a primary school student, a madrasa student, a garment worker, a lawyer, a college student, a housewife, a mentally challenged minor, a nurse. One of the latest horror stories is Shahinoor Akhter Tania's, a young nurse of Ibn Sina Hospital, who was on her way to see her family in her ancestral home in Kishoreganj. She was going on a Swarnalata Paribahan bus from Mohakhali and had talked to family members a few times until 8pm when her phone was found switched off.

A switched off phone is always a cause of terror for loved ones.

And Tania's family had their worst fears come true. She had been raped by three men including the bus driver and helper, on the empty bus, after which they hit her head with a blunt object and then threw her out of the bus so that it would look like an accident. Tania did not survive. The police gathered this information after five individuals were arrested including the driver and helper and placed in remand, after Tania's father had filed the case.

But for Tania's family, her friends and colleagues, there is little solace in knowing that the possible rapist-murderers have been apprehended and there is hope that they will be meted out the punishment they deserve. For the rest of us, we must accept that another bright young woman's life has been cut short after experiencing the worst kind of sexual violence.

We want so many things for our girls. We want them to go to school and university. We want them to be doctors, nurses, lawyers. We want them to work, earn their own living and contribute to the development of the country. But we cannot provide the most basic environment for that to happen—one which is not constantly hounded by fears of sexual violence and even death. We cannot make sure that they will be safe in school, while on the streets, at home or while travelling on a bus.

What is most frustrating is that nothing seems to deter these monsters who feel they are somehow invincible and perversely entitled to rape and even kill a girl/woman and get off scot-free. In Tania's case, how did the rapist-murderers feel so confident that they could carry out their horrific crime and get away with it? That, too, after 27-year-old Rupa Khatun's rapist-murderers were given the death sentence by a Tangail court. Rupa Khatun, a law student from Sirajganj, was raped and killed on a bus headed for Mymensingh in August last year by the bus driver and three assistants, and

her body was flung off into the Tangail-Mymensingh road. The court gave the verdict after only 14 working days. So, did Tania's assaulters not know about this? Is this all because of an information gap?!

Obviously not. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the accused in Rupa's rape and murder case have all appealed and the hearing for their appeal has not yet started. Generally speaking, the low conviction rate and the lengthy legal process contribute to the idea of invincibility of these sexual predators.

Which brings us back to that ugly term—"gang rape"—how can a group of men plan together to rape a girl/woman and then kill her? Do we have an epidemic of sexual predators?

"Gang rape" is a terrifying word in modern jargon and is the perversion of a

myths, that rapists have raped women who wore the "right" clothes, girls who were at home, women who did not go out for work. In case of the two gang rapes in Shubarnachar, Noakhali, both victims were housewives and subjected to sexual violence by groups of men because they had "dared" to support a political candidate of their own choice, not because they were breaking cultural/religious norms. The rapist gangs were affiliated with the politically influential.

In one case, the woman who has four children was gang-raped during the December national election because she defied a former upazila parishad member by voting for "sheaf of paddy"; he later ordered his men to rape her to teach her a lesson. In the second case, a 48-year-old woman, a mother of eight children, was raped by a group of men sent by

Her male friend was also mercilessly beaten up. Jyoti later died of her horrific injuries in a Singapore hospital. The rapists had been drinking and had earlier robbed another person on the bus. The phenomenon of sexual assault on a moving vehicle has been around for quite a while.

After the Nirbhaya case which caused national uproar, several amendments were made to India's existing laws on sexual offenses to provide better protection to women although women and girls continue to be raped in that country. We too have very stringent laws to deal with rape and murder after rape. Yet little has changed in terms of deterring such sexual predators from carrying out their despicable crimes. It is crucial that the entire legal process is sensitised to favour the victim and not the



Students of Ibn Sina Nursing Institute stage a human chain in Kalyanpur protesting the rape and killing of Shahinoor Akhter Tania.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

society subsumed in an overindulgence of male entitlement. It is also the consequence of the normalisation of rape by considering it to be a "lesser crime" compared to, say, petty theft in the streets, where the perpetrator, if caught, will be beaten to a pulp, even killed, by the mob. It is part of a patriarchal culture in which females are regarded as lesser, expendable beings, mainly sex objects. It is a culture that imposes the burden of shame on the victim rather than the rapist.

In a society mired in male chauvinism, a female whether child or adult, if alone, is seen as easy prey. Often religion is falsely cited to dictate all sorts of justifications for a female to be raped: her clothing; that she was outside the home by herself; for working outside the home; for going to school (again outside the home).

But of course, we know that these are

an upazila vice chairman candidate, as she had been campaigning for a rival candidate.

According to studies, gang rapes are more violent, the injuries to the victim more severe than single individual assaults, hence the trauma is multiplied. Members of the group tend to dehumanise the victim before and during the rape. According to a 2013 Lancet study, the motives of rape include entertainment (two-thirds of gang rape perpetrators), to inflict punishment to the victim (30 percent) or because of alcohol consumption (alcohol consumption).

In the horrific Delhi gang rape case of 2012, a 23-year-old physiotherapy student, Jyoti Singh, who became known as Nirbhaya (meaning fearless), fell victim to six assailants on the bus she had boarded with a male friend. The assailants included the driver of the bus.

rapist—from the time an FIR is filed at the police station to the treatment of the victim by the police, medical examiner and courts during the trial, to the carrying out of the sentence.

The state, moreover, must take a strong stand against rapists who take the shelter of their political connections to get away with such heinous crimes.

But along with this, what is most needed is sensitising our boys regarding their perception of females. Boys must be taught at home, and in school, to respect and honour women and look at them as equal human beings. It will require a collective effort by the government and the public through massive campaigns in all media to change the misogynistic views that have allowed this rape culture to pervade our society.

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

In Gaza, the bombs have stopped, but our suffering continues

As long as Israel maintains its siege, Palestinians will remain prisoners in our own land

AHMED ABU ARTEMA

IT'S Ramadan in Gaza. This year, it is punctuated by scarcity and fear, rather than feast and celebration. For many families in Gaza, this will be a month of mourning. Twenty-nine Palestinians were killed during last weekend's fierce Israeli military assault, including two pregnant women and an infant just a few months old. The night before the holy month began, flashes of light penetrated the dark sky as Israel dropped bombs on us yet again.

It all started on Friday when Israel killed four Palestinian demonstrators during the peaceful Great Return March, a grassroots weekly protest movement I helped launch last year in response to Israel's ongoing denial of our basic human rights, including its illegal, 12-year siege. Israel's violence against the protesters triggered a response. On Saturday morning, military wings of Palestinian factions retaliated by launching dozens of homemade rockets toward towns bordering the Gaza Strip.

I always advocate for nonviolent civil disobedience, but our community suffers under Israel's violent policies every day. It doesn't take much analysis to see that some will resist the violence through whatever means they can.

Israel then launched a series of deadly attacks targeting apartment buildings, local businesses, and media offices in a bustling neighbourhood called Al-Remal, in the heart of Gaza City. Buildings crumbled into ashes in an instant. A shop owner, hysterical after seeing his only source of income gone, screamed out of desperation: "Where are the missiles hidden in this building? Where are the



A young boy carries a Palestinian flag during a Great March of Return demonstration in Gaza.

PHOTO: AFP

nuclear weapons they targeted? Show me!"

We all know what the devastated shopkeeper knows: Israel bombs civilian residential and commercial buildings to keep us in submission—to deter us from rising up and resisting the everyday violence waged against us through its ongoing occupation and blockade of our land.

Like all parents in Gaza, I am at a loss for how to comfort and calm my children each time an Israeli bomb drops. With every explosion, my children run to me in terror. I try to placate them by saying,

"Those explosions are far away from our home. They're near the sea and they won't come near us." I know I'm hiding the truth from them because no one in Gaza is safe, and Israel has killed many children their age. But if I can't stop the violence, the least I can do is alleviate its negative impact on my children.

A ceasefire was announced on Monday (May 6), but I don't know how long it will hold. Netanyahu declared that "the campaign is not over" and added, "We are preparing to continue." While a ceasefire may provide temporary relief from Israel's large-scale bombing campaigns, it won't

end the daily suffering our children endure living under Israel's ongoing military rule.

The reality is that the violence didn't start a few days ago. When we're not being bombed by Israel, Israel's snipers are gunning down peaceful protesters, journalists, and medics. Since the Great Return March started last year, Israeli snipers killed around 270 Palestinians. And when Palestinians aren't being killed by missiles or bullets, we're dying a slow and painful death as a result of Israel's blockade. For 12 years, Israel has limited our access to clean drinking water, food, lifesaving medicine, electricity, and construction supplies to rebuild our homes. Without adequate food, shelter, and water, we cannot survive.

Those of us who are left are tormented psychologically. Israel controls our borders and our ability to move, so we are prisoners on our own land. We are denied the right to travel freely to find work or pursue our education, to visit our families in other towns, or even to seek treatment at a hospital. Our youth unemployment hovers at a staggering 70 percent because Israel bombs our businesses and cuts off our trade. Gaza's young people are denied even a flicker of hope.

Ceasefire or not, there is no way out of the endless violence until Israel, the occupying power, ends its illegal blockade and siege of Gaza. Israel cannot control our lives and our land forever. Palestinians, like all people in the world, want to live free.

Ahmed Abu Artema is an independent Gaza-based writer, social-media activist, and one of the organisers of the Great Return March. Courtesy: The Nation/Asia News Network