

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Baghdadi’s death a relief

Another such threat must never be allowed to rise again

THE world in general and the Muslim world in particular must be heaving a sigh of relief at the news of Baghdadi’s death. While this has been welcomed by some world leaders, it is time to ask ourselves some hard questions about how such a callous man was allowed to grow and become one of the most notorious terrorists the world has seen.

The case of Baghdadi can be studied from three perspectives: Baghdadi—the man, the organisation that he represented, and his philosophy of the caliphate that he so pretentiously preached. As a man Baghdadi was ruthless and cruel, killing hundreds and thousands of innocent people. Most of his victims were people belonging to his own creed, often from his own sect. The organisation that Baghdadi represented distorted the teachings of Islam and manipulated people in the name of religion to join their flawed cause of the caliphate, which is nothing like the historic Islamic caliphate that we know about, or anything close to the philosophy of Islam. However, as flawed as Baghdadi’s philosophy was, it had subscribers, followers who believed in his ideas and joined his cause. Even people from as far away as Bangladesh, albeit a minuscule minority, fell for Baghdadi’s ideologies and went to fight his meaningless war.

We would like to ask the Muslim world why it allowed such a distorted philosophy, which is patently anti-Islam, to find audience among some segments of its people? Why did the Muslim community not challenge these ideas and stop them from spreading in a collective voice? Why did the Muslims not stand up against Baghdadi? Why were his ideas allowed to sustain? These are difficult questions, but it is high time we asked them.

It is also time we contemplate how Baghdadi’s radical and conservative ideas seeped into a liberal society such as ours—a society that is driven by our celebration of diversity and openness of thoughts, a syncretic culture that is inclusive in all regards. We must address the reasons that allowed a certain portion of our population, although a small minority, fall victim to the distorted philosophy of a vindictive man, such as Baghdadi. We must seek answers to these questions and eliminate the root causes that encouraged some of our people to take such a hard-line misguided path.

An avoidable fire-related death

Both enforcement and awareness needed

A fire broke out in a 13-storey high, posh block of apartments in Dhanmondi residential area on October 26 where an elderly woman working as a household help perished after inhaling plumes of black smoke. We keep writing about these fires and the needless deaths of people, either by fire or smoke inhalation and nothing much happens afterwards. The circumstance of her death speaks volumes about how little fire safety measures are thought of by real estate companies when designing both commercial and residential buildings! While two others fell sick on different floors, they were, thankfully, rescued in time by fire fighters.

The incident occurred in an upscale part of town with wide roads that allowed for the fire service trucks to navigate freely. We are told by the authorities that they suspect an electric short circuit in the building but more will be known after the investigation. The frequent reports of fire in shopping centres and apartment blocks in the city highlights the age-old problem of how they get past the Rajuk authorities when building plans are passed. The fire service department gives a clearance certificate for occupancy of buildings after construction, which is supposed to be based upon an onsite inspection to see whether they have adhered to the set standard for fire safety—is this being done in reality? And are random checks carried out?

While enforcement of rules remains a far cry, we often overlook the need for fire safety which goes beyond simply having firefighting tools in the building; the residents must know how to use them in the event of a fire. Building authorities—both commercial and residential need to conduct regular drills so that occupants know what to do and what to avoid when a fire occurs. These issues are always highlighted by the media after a fire-related incident occurs. We are assured and then reassured by the authorities that things will change and the guilty parties shall be brought to justice. Unfortunately, the wheels of justice move slowly in a country where rules are openly flouted and ignored without repercussions. Until we get our house in order regarding enforcement of building codes and raising awareness, these tragedies will continue.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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End bullying in schools and beyond

I was shocked by a recent report in *The Daily Star* titled, “Bullying goes unreported, ignored” given that it continues to have such a negative impact on our children. What is worse is the fact that such notorious practices are widespread across various educational institutions in Bangladesh and even the little ones are not spared from the dirty grips of bullying or ragging.

It is truly shocking that this culture of shaming peers has managed to manipulate young minds in such a negative manner, where the actions range from calling names to manhandling. The consequences of bullying are horrific, affecting the victims’ mental health, quality of life and discouraging them from attending schools. In the worst case scenario, bullying can also lead to suicide.

We must all come forward in this regard, and do our part before another innocent child falls victim to this menace.

Md Shamiul Islam, Sirajganj

Questions unfashionable

Economic disparity, resilience and our fight against climate change

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

THE threat of climate change is growing more real and more urgent by the day. According to *Climate Nexus*, a rise in temperature by 1.5 percent can lead to sea-level rise of 48cm, leaving 46 million people at risk of displacement; this could mean water shortages in Asia, Australia, the Mediterranean and Brazil; it will bring down the production of essentials like wheat, maize and soybeans; and as per estimates by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), this will put 20-30 percent of species at risk of extinction. These are just some of the risks posed by climate change.

From policymakers to children—everyone is doing their part to raise awareness about this spiralling global problem; and rightfully so. The urgency of the situations has compelled governments and international bodies like the United Nations to map out and initiate effective programmes to fight climate change, requiring billions and trillions of dollars.

For instance, Germany’s ruling coalition government has agreed to spend 40 billion Euro, which translates to USD 44 billion in just four years, till 2023, to cut the country’s carbon emissions. Mexico has pledged to reduce its emissions by half by 2050, and the cost for this in economic terms would mean almost 7 to 15 percent of their GDP. And then there is the EU’s plan to cut emissions by at least 80 percent by 2050, which, according to a European Commission report, could translate to average annual investment of 1.33 trillion Euro or USD 1.44 trillion in 2031-2050.

The undertakings are expensive involving hefty sums of public money and needs time to yield results, thus ambitious, especially in a world where resources are scarce and choices are life altering, at least for the people struggling to get by in the present.

According to Global Hunger Index, the number of people suffering from hunger rose to 822 million in 2018 from 785 million in 2015. UNHCR’s annual Global Trends Report released in 2019 suggest that in 2018, almost 70.8 million people had been displaced—they have nowhere to go and are living off the charity of the donors; at times perishing on the seas and under the open sky, because often countries turn their backs on these

desperate refugees—the very countries that are at the helm of these climate change initiatives.

Add to this the problem of rising economic disparity among the people. There are more billionaires in the world now than ever before. According to recent Oxfam data, the “wealth of the world’s billionaires increased [by] USD 900 billion in the last year [2018], which is USD 2.5 billion a day”; “while almost half of humanity have barely escaped extreme poverty, living on less than USD 5.50 a day”. According to the same Oxfam data presentation, “every day 10,000 people die because they lack access to affordable healthcare” and 262

“The sustainability of the environment, once mistakenly thought to compete with economic development, is now understood to be complementary and necessary to ‘end poverty in all its forms everywhere’”.

According to Isabell Kempf, “New tools of economic analysis and transparency that reveal the true value of natural capital and sustainable ENR management mobilise support for poverty-environment mainstreaming within government.”

This is true for Bangladesh as well, a country that stands in the line of fire in the fight against climate change. We have 40 million people in our country



The threat of climate change is growing more real and more urgent by the day. PHOTO: REUTERS/BRET HARTMAN

million children are being deprived of their education every day, due to rising economic disparity between the rich and the poor.

In the face of such gruelling numbers people often tend to wonder which of the necessities should policymakers prioritise while allocating scarce resources—provide for the people and meet their immediate needs, or prepare to fight a deadly foe that can claim millions of lives in the coming years?


This dilemma had troubled policymakers for long, but it is time to ask ourselves: are sustainability and income equality mutually exclusive? Apparently not. According to a report by Isabell Kempf, Co-Director UNDP-UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative,

suffering from food insecurity and 11 million facing acute hunger (World Food Programme). Similarly, we are home to more than 1.1 million refugees who had to flee Myanmar, in the face of systematic genocide perpetrated by their army, as part of an ethnic cleansing policy in the Rakhine State. And with donor support waning, it is becoming extremely difficult to feed this ever-increasing population.

Youth unemployment remains a big challenge with the rate of unemployment in Bangladesh currently standing at 4.37 percent, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Of the total unemployed, 46 percent are university graduates.

Child labour due to poverty is another big challenge for us—children are still

Seeking happiness the Bhutanese way



DASHO KINLEY DORJI

PEOPLE and organisation in many countries around the world claim to have adopted Bhutan’s human development vision of Gross National Happiness (GNH). But what they actually portray is different people’s perceptions of GNH. Some are philosophical, some are well researched academic constructions, and some are spaced-out theories.

GNH is described as an esoteric philosophy, an inspiring concept, a development goal, a measure of development, a wake-up call, and so on.

It is also being criticised as a platform for ambitious politicians, a mere catchphrase, an empty promise, meaningless platitudes, a purely intellectual concept, an academic redundancy, and so on.

If confusion is truly the beginning of wisdom, all this is wonderful.

I, too, would like to add to the confusion by sharing my understanding of GNH and attempting some responses and clarifications to ideas that are being exchanged.

To talk about GNH, I believe that we have to first define happiness.

I know that the world’s greatest minds have been trying to define happiness for centuries but I have my idea of a GNH perspective on happiness. The happiness in GNH is not fun, pleasure, thrill, excitement—or any other fleeting sense—it is the deeper and permanent sense of contentment that we consciously or, in our sub-conscience, seek.

Have we achieved GNH in Bhutan? No.

Has GNH had an impact on Bhutanese society? Yes.

Everyone who visits Bhutan senses a different atmosphere from the moment he or she arrives. I believe that this sense comes from the values that have been nurtured over the centuries.

Today, we are calling it GNH.

I offer my understanding of GNH as it exists today.

I see GNH in four forms—the intuitive, the intellectual, the responsibility, the emerging global.

The intuitive

First of all, I see intuitive GNH values in past generations of Bhutanese who had a strong mutual understanding and enjoyed an interdependent existence as members of small rural communities.

The village astrologer, the lay monk, the lead singer, the carpenter, the arrow maker, the elders and the youth, all had their responsibilities.

The values, drawn from Buddhist teachings, from the experience and wisdom of our ancestors and from the very practical needs of a subsistence farming lifestyle, inculcated a reverence for an interdependent existence with all life forms, or all sentient beings.

Some examples of this are seen in the reluctance to hunt and fish (both of which are banned in the country), the sometimes frustrating tendency to be less “productive” to avoid hurting or upsetting someone, and putting up with the cacophony of an unruly stray dog population. People identified their own priorities in life.

advanced concept of the Human Development Index that the UNDP has been refining.

The responsibility

This takes me to the third perception level: GNH as a government responsibility.

As discussed, I think the definition of happiness as the abiding sense of contentment and GNH as a government responsibility make basic sense, although the translation of this into policy, legislation and prioritised activities is very much a work in progress.

In other words, we may agree on goals, values, and responsibilities, but differ sharply on the best strategies to achieve those goals. And yet, it is the



Bhutan uses ‘Gross National Happiness’ to measure human development rather than GDP. PHOTO: REUTERS/SINGYE WANGCHUK

In the 1980s, farmers of one village were taught, successfully, to do a double crop of paddy, meaning that they doubled their rice production that year. They refused to do it the following year because, as one farmer said, “We did not have time to play archery, to enjoy our festivals, to bask in the sun”.

The philosophical

Another perception level I see is the attempt to define, explain and measure GNH, along with the academic construction of the concept. As discussed earlier, the best accepted definition of happiness is the abiding sense of inter-relatedness with all life forms and of contentment that lies within the self.

This is related to the happiness that Buddhists seek from the practice of meditation.

In one understanding of GNH as a development vision, a representative of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) described it as a much more

recognition that GNH must be the basis of mainstream policy thinking that sets Bhutan apart from some countries that have expressed interest in GNH.

As we saw during the GNH conferences in Thailand, Brazil, and Canada, some people doing good work among their communities—NGOs and civil society organisations—think they have found an identity in GNH.

In Bhutan, however, the four pillars and nine domains have given politicians and bureaucrats some idea of national priorities. This is useful because public servants do not intellectualise policy but make decisions that have an impact on all citizens.

The international discourse

The fourth perception level is the “internationalisation” of the GNH discussion.

Bhutan has certainly not worked out the solutions to the world’s problems, but I think we have opened up an

being forced to take up domestic work, if fortunate, and risky industrial labour tasks, in order to earn daily sustenance.

These figures pose some difficult questions. What should we prioritise when allocating funds in the budget—food, employment generation opportunities, education, a better life for our people, or projects that would enable us to fight the impacts of climate change?

According to water resource and climate change specialist Professor Ainun Nishat, it is essential to increase people’s resilience to fight climate change; however, economic disparity can curb people’s resilience against climate change.

While talking with this writer, Professor Nishat added that the poor do not have the ability to fight climate change because their resilience capacity is limited. One way to address this might be to enhance the skills of the youth, which would make them eligible for skill-oriented jobs; this can result in better standard of living of the individuals and their families and improved resilience against climate threats.

The better the standard of living, the more sustainable lifestyle choices people will make. For instance, often in front of shops, we see boards advertising sustainable products, like jute bags instead of polythene bags, which a buyer has to pay extra cash for. However, it will not be possible for a buyer to pay extra for a jute bag, if they cannot afford it. The end result, despite sustainability messages: the buyer will end up availing the free polythene bag to carry the purchased good. The message is clear: unless we reduce economic disparity and ensure prosperity of the people, despite all the money spent in making advertisements and promoting them, we will not be able to get the masses to make environment friendly lifestyle choices. And this holds true for the world at large.

With depleting resources and increasing threat of climate change, it is time we made smart climate decisions, that would enable us to fight off global warming while also bringing people out of poverty. With effective poverty-environment and climate mainstreaming tools, sustainable resource management and integrated bottom-up policy formation and implementation approach, we will be able to strike the right balance between income equality and sustainability. The question is: are we ready to ask ourselves the hard questions?

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amazing conversation and we need to give this conversation coherence and direction.

The concept of GNH, even partially understood, excites and inspires people. After five international conferences on GNH and the April 2 meeting in New York, one criticism at home has been, “stop preaching GNH overseas and make it work in Bhutan”.

This is a resounding example of the need for clarity in GNH thinking and understanding.

Here, I emphasise the point that we are not preaching to anyone, rather, we ourselves are learning out there.

There is a vast amount of research and analysis and experimentation done on GNH-related issues—sustainability, well-being, climate change and much more—by intellectuals including Nobel laureates, by universities and institutions, by civil society.

Bhutan must learn from them to deepen its own understanding of GNH.

International discourse can only benefit Bhutan because we ourselves do not have the capacity to undertake the necessary research and analysis required to implement GNH fully at home.

In conclusion, there is a growing understanding—even fear—that the human population, driven by the values of GDP, is literally consuming the earth.

That is why GNH is a pun on GDP which used to be known as Gross National Product. The loud message is that human development needs a higher goal—beyond GDP.

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Dasho Kinley Dorji is the former editor-in-chief/managing director of Kuensel newspaper. He is the author of the book titled “Within the Realm of Happiness”.

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