

Full execution of CHT Accord can brook no delay

Remove all impediments

THE CHT Accord signed 22 years ago was certainly a very significant achievement of the AL government, especially of Sheikh Hasina. The agreement, signed between the PCJSS or as more popularly known, the Shanti Bahini, and the government of Bangladesh reinforced the belief that neither violence nor a military solution was the answer to a conflict that had resisted resolution for nearly 25 years and cost the lives of many people. Regrettably, after more than two decades since the accord was signed, many of the important provisions are still to be implemented as claimed by one side, while the official version is very different. And it seems that there is a PR game between the PCJSS and the government; the former claiming that nearly half of the 52 provisions of the accord are to be implemented while the government claims that 48 of those have been executed. How is it that there is such a wide variance in the figures of the government and the PCJCC regarding the implementation of the accord?

Given that we have in place the same government led by the same party, and the same leader as the prime minister who took the initiative to end violence in CHT, and which drew international accolade, it is incomprehensible that some of the accord provisions would remain unimplemented. Therefore, the people of the CHT cannot be faulted if they feel frustrated and believe that the accord was merely an eyewash.

The ball is in the government's court and it devolves on the government to clear the obstacles that stand in the way of the CHT Accord. It needs hardly be restated that it is the state that has entered into a compact with a segment of its ethnic minority and if it does not follow through on its commitment to that group its very credibility will be at stake, so will be the credibility of the AL government and the confidence of the people on the government and the prime minister. And in a restless world such a situation has serious implication.

Proliferation of small arms very worrying

Bring legal arms dealers under greater scrutiny

THE sale of illicit arms brought in from a neighbouring country has been an ongoing activity paying huge dividends to those involved in arms smuggling for decades. What is new here is that law enforcers have detected the involvement of a section of legal arms dealers' involvement in the racket, which makes enforcement much more difficult. Indeed, we are informed by the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) police unit that these syndicates have brought in some 200 firearms in the last two years and sold in the grey market after barcodes were removed to make these untraceable.

Regardless of the protestations by the Legal Arms Dealers' Association, CTTC officials have stated that they believe a section of dealers are under the radar and some have been arrested. The implications of sale of small arms to criminals and political goons using the cover of legal arms sales is not lost on anyone. Not only is it a threat to maintaining law and order, but the easy availability of lethal firearms gives rise to crimes like murder and terrorism. The other point to remember is that those involved in the narcotics trade are heavily dependent on procuring these illegal arms to settle scores and if transnational gangs continue to use 10 border points to bring in firearms into Bangladesh, we can expect to see growing violence where criminals will be as well armed as law enforcers.

At a time when the country is experiencing relative peace, policymakers and law enforcers must collaborate with their counterparts across international borders to put a stop to this dangerous trade. Simultaneously, the cases and charge sheets submitted against apprehended suspects must be thoroughly investigated and convictions made at the earliest. The authorities must display a zero-tolerance policy towards illegal arms as it has the potential for serious consequences.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Philanthropists who touch our hearts

I recently read a report on *The Daily Star* titled, "Picking up where Baker left off" and I was immensely touched by it. Such a beautiful story truly serves as a strong means of inspiration. Dr Edric Sargission Baker from New Zealand established the Kailakuri Health Care Center in Madhupur upazila in 1996 to provided primary healthcare services to the poor for free, until he passed away on September 3, 2015, aged 75. Later in July 2018, Dr Jason Morgenson and Dr Merindy Zoschke joined the facility as medical consultants to help continue the legacy of Dr Baker or better known as "Daktar Bhai".

The fact that a foreigner from a faraway land had travelled to our country to provide medical care to the poor in remote villages and train the locals to assist him is highly commendable, and so is the voluntary support from the doctor couple who joined later. Wouldn't it be great if we could establish more of such healthcare facilities in other rural regions? I mean we don't need to wait for foreigners to assist us, I truly believe that we the citizens, can volunteer for such noble initiatives. Living in the metropolis, we are surely privileged but we should not forget that many people continue to suffer in the villages due to the lack of basic healthcare facilities. The least we can do is lend them a helping hand.

Naveen Islam, Bogura



BLOWN' IN THE WIND
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

selfes to harness the feral passengers. Meanwhile, passengers with relatively proper flying experiences pretend to be a class apart, albeit sitting in the same coach. They display their discomfort at being unwilling witnesses to various Tom-and-Jerry episodes featuring the native sons and the club-bouncer-like flight-staff. This "gentry" class maintaining their proper flying etiquette cover their eyes to sleep or indulge in TV screens to disown the ongoing action as well as the perky participants. This ambivalence points out one national dilemma: we are ashamed of the mannerism of a class that lacks proper skills and education, yet we are proud of the remittances they earn to improve the financial health of our country.

Our unskilled migrant workers are employed abroad as "cheap" labour in sectors where the locals are not interested. The nationals of host countries may feel that these jobs given to the foreigners are dirty, dangerous, or of low status with poor payment. With an unemployment rate of near 4.4 percent, we want our workers to work abroad and generate remittances to spur consumer spending and boost our forex reserves. We want these workers to maintain and improve the 7 percent contributions to our GDP, bringing in a deposit of USD 15.54 billion in our treasury in 2018 (RMMRU Report). While we like these numerical figures, we have little sympathy as a nation for the human figures who take part in this number game. Somehow, the dehumanisation of our workers begin at home, even before they are sent abroad. This convoluted mind-set is responsible for an oxymoron: our prize commodity relies on cheap labour. This attitude, for me, is a part of the chronic problem related to the abuse of migrant workers;

news of which is haunting our media in the shape of mutilated and muted bodies.

Every day, we are hearing new stories of torture and abuse. One woman has been rescued from a middle-eastern country after she made a heart-wrenching plea in a video clip that went viral. Her employers have burnt private parts of her body by pouring hot oil. This is an example of the level of hostility, cruelty and perversion that our workers face overseas. Other female migrant workers who have recently returned are giving us similar harrowing accounts. BBC and Al

have been received since 2005, according to Wage Earners' Welfare Board.

Recently, an insensitive comment by a minister who tried to downplay the severity of the issue by rationalising the casualty ratio as extreme examples drew severe criticism. Compare this to the Filipino president who decided to ban sending of migrant workers following the death of seven domestic workers in Kuwait. There are mixed views about banning export of labour force. After all, migrants are perceived as agents of change. They contribute to the socio-

me, is that of a mind-set. First, we need to respect our nationals as citizens before we value them in monetary terms as wage earners. Anyone who has passed through our international airport must have noticed how our immigration officers, security guards, airlines officials belittle our migrant workers at every available opportunity. The humiliation with which the agencies process and parcel the workers speak of the treatments that await them at their work destination. If we can't stand by our own nationals, how can we expect others to do so?

I remember in one flight, a family traveling with a small child could not figure out how the toilet worked, and the little boy relieved himself on the floor. The whole plane was soon filled with a pungent smell, and one crew forced the father to clean the filth. She was fuming standing next to me, saying, "If they can pay hundreds of dollars for their tickets then why can't they pay a few more for a diaper." "You need to understand that they have probably come from the village, and this is the first time they are on a plane," I hurled a mild explanation. "How difficult it is to distinguish a hole from the floor when you are in a toilet?" I had no answer. I did feel that before we send our men abroad we need to give them a proper orientation. Looking back, I feel that I did not own up my fellow passenger. A child is a child, and is beyond adult scrutiny.

Having said that we also need to devise a system that gives the workers pre-departure and post-arrival support service. In the Philippines, during Christmas, I was surprised to see special dance arranged for returning workers. They were given the welcome as national heroes. Here, these returning workers are treated as easy victims whose gullibility could be exploited. Those who have faced traumatic experiences are given psychological support (BRAC has some programmes in limited scope). The labour attachés in our embassies must be more pro-active in being protective of our citizens. Since not sending is an option, let us at least prepare our workers for the best and the worst that their travels entail.

Shamsad Mortuza is Professor of English, University of Dhaka. Currently on leave, he is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB. Email: shamsad71@hotmail.com



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Some female migrant workers, who returned home after having endured torture by their Saudi employers, walk out of the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Jazeera have aired stories on what they dubbed as the Modern Day Slavery, where female workers are sold on Google or Android Apps. Soon after the arrival of an employee, their work-permits are sold through online auction, and the employee is passed on from one house to another like ping pong without her knowledge. One study conducted by the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) found 35 percent of our female workers have been sexually abused. On the other hand, the bodies of some 38,473 deceased migrant workers

economic development by the transfer of financial and human resources towards their native communities. The knowledge and technological know-hows acquired by migrant workers during their stay abroad become an asset for their native country. And ban will simply encourage the illegal market of human trafficking. So we need to fix the headache, rather than chopping of the proverbial head. To meet the problem head-on, we need to bring in the heart. What is missing is the empathy to stand by our workers.

In other words, the problem, if you ask

Why does India's media cover some rapes extensively and ignore others?

They pounce on stories of crime against women that sell, then almost invariably do a shoddy job of reporting them

KALPANA SHARMA

DOES the media contribute directly, or indirectly, to distorting our understanding of the reasons for the increasing violence against women?

I ask this question against the background of the horrific rape and murder of a 26-year-old veterinarian in Hyderabad on the evening of November 27. Her charred remains were found the next day after her parents managed, after several failed attempts, to get the police to file a missing person report.

All media ran with the story—print, TV, digital. It had all the elements of horror. It happened not in a desolate, distant area but near a toll booth in a metropolitan city. And it reminded us of the everydayness of violence: a working woman, waiting to go home, could be abducted, raped and murdered within shouting distance of a toll booth.

There was outrage, as expected. Demonstrations, young women holding placards that asked "Am I next?" These were mostly in Hyderabad, with a few protests in other cities.

The public demonstration of anger and the media coverage was enough to push the state government to act. Within days, the police apprehended four young men who apparently confessed to the crime. The government promised to "fast-track" the case. And the policemen who had delayed noting the complaint by her parents were suspended.

At the same time, there was a show of competitive concern, especially amongst politicians. As "Hang the Rapists" was a slogan that was past its expiry date, as the death penalty for rape was already in the statute after the 2012 gang rape of a 23-year-old woman in Delhi, what else could they demand to be noticed above the anger on the street?

Samajwadi Party MP Jaya Bachchan won that competition hands down when she declared in Parliament (the place where laws are made) that rapists should be lynched in public. In other words, the public should take the law into its own hands. This in a country where public lynchings of defenceless Muslim men have been conducted in the name of protecting cows, with the full knowledge that there will be little or no punishment for the crime.

Given the recent history of lynchings in India, Bachchan's remarks are even more ominous. In the Hyderabad case, the names of the four accused were leaked even before the police held a press conference. One of the accused is Muslim. That was enough for the Hindutva army on social media, as *AltNews* reported, to dive straight into a communal war of their own creation, painting dire scenarios of

what could happen in the future. As the article rightly points out, "A disturbing phenomenon is observed in recent times where crimes as heinous as rape are communalised. The trend is not only true in the case of social media but for also prominent individuals in the government and media outlets capable of shaping public opinion. Since the brutal incident was reported, the police had identified all the four accused. But a social media campaign attempted to paint a communal picture. Irresponsible media reports, with clickbait headlines, furthered the misleading narrative instead of dousing the hate."

The question for the media, given the growing atmosphere of hate, compounded now by politicians

questions we must ask.

There are other questions. The name and identity of the woman were used in practically all media in the immediate aftermath of the crime. This happened despite a 2018 Supreme Court ruling, in the context of the rape and murder of an 8-year-old girl in Kathua, Jammu, that the media cannot name a rape victim even if she dies. Yet, the same mistake was repeated. By the time some media houses realised their mistake, her name and photograph were all over social media and even today come up when you do an internet search.

Linked to this is the norm that any respectable media house ought to follow: that even reporting on the locality where the victim lives, or giving away the identity



PHOTO: REUTERS/ANUSHREE FADNAVIS

People in New Delhi attend a candle light march to protest against the rape and murder of a 27-year-old woman on the outskirts of Hyderabad.

suggesting rapists should be lynched, is whether the photographs of the accused should be printed.

These are men against whom the police claim they have a case. But a charge sheet has not been filed. Do they not have the right to a fair trial? How many men have been accused and imprisoned for years on terror charges, for instance, before being acquitted by the courts? Given our dysfunctional criminal justice system, is it not incumbent on the media to err on the side of caution, rather than encourage, and even join, the lynch mobs? Is it not the duty of the media to aid justice rather than perpetuate injustice? These are

of her parents and family, is equivalent to revealing her identity. Yet, this too continues to be violated. Not surprisingly, the residents of the colony in Hyderabad where the woman's parents live locked the gates and put up a notice that read, "No Media, No Police, No Outsiders—No sympathy, only action, justice."

Finally, there is the question of the selective amplification of crimes against women. How does the media choose which ones to report on extensively? Convenience, proximity, scale of the crime are some criteria. But also class, caste, locale—biases that are so routine they go unnoticed.

A few days before the rape in Hyderabad, a Dalit woman who sold utensils and balloons was raped and murdered in a village in Telangana, 129 km from Adilabad. The *Deccan Chronicle* carried a story about her husband complaining that the state government did not respond, perhaps because they were poor and Dalit, nor did the civil society. Nor did the media, I might add.

The lack of interest in the media about crimes away from regular beats and metropolitan areas has a direct impact on our understanding of the extent of violence against women, especially poor and marginalised women, and the reasons for it. In fact, in the week before and after the Hyderabad rape, several such horrific incidents were reported from different parts of the country. But only one was pursued by the media.

Such selective reporting reinforces the belief that public spaces are unsafe for women. Instead of our society questioning why any woman should be afraid to step out, women are asked to take precautions.

In fact, within days of the Hyderabad rape, the city's police commissioner came out with 14 recommendations on what women should do to be safe. Many women were outraged by his advisory.

One of them wrote on Twitter, "We are raped by men so for heaven's sake issue a damn advisory for men to NOT RAPE us. Why the hell are we paying the penalty for men who are monsters? This is the problem, tell your men to NOT RAPE WOMEN! Keep your damn safety advisory to yourself."

The other side of selective focus on some crimes against women is that people forget that over 90 percent of sexual assaults on women take place in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, by men known to them. By constantly reporting only on crimes in public spaces, this reality gets obscured.

Although one could argue that the media cannot report every crime committed against every woman, it is evident that reporting crimes against women is a selling proposition. The media thrives on crime, controversy and crises. The media can generate the latter two when they are in short supply. But as there is no shortage of crime, the media sets out to pick and choose the crime stories that sell.

In doing so, despite the debates, the judicial rulings, the protests from the afflicted, the media continues to fail women victims of crime and to create false narratives on an issue like violence against women.

Kalpna Sharma is an independent journalist and columnist. The article was first published by current affairs portal Newslandry.com