

UGC's directive to stop evening classes is rash

It seriously impedes universities' autonomy

THE University Grants Commission's (UGC) directive asking all public universities to stop evening classes has created more confusion than clarity. The directive also asks the university authorities to take permission before the appointment of new faculty, introduction of a new department, any programme, before creating new posts or abolishing old ones. Public universities are autonomous bodies, and such directives would seriously curb their independence and go against the spirit of the 1973 University Act. We are surprised that at a time when it is not being able to perform its normal functions, the UGC would try to take on such additional responsibilities which, in effect, would be denying public universities their autonomy.

On the specific issue of evening classes, the basic criticism is that teachers are earning extra through them. But what is being overlooked is that, all over the world, it is standard practice to have evening classes in public universities as they are catered to professionals who can only make time for class after work. The main idea is for individuals to enhance their skills and qualifications which will give them greater opportunities in the job market or for the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, the contention that conducting evening classes is ruining the image and characteristics of public universities is rather unconvincing, if not facetious. If the UGC is so concerned with the image of public universities, why is it not concerned with the alleged corruption in the administration of some universities, the unhindered "tender business" and terror student cadres? Do not such anomalies tarnish the image of the universities?

If there is a concern regarding the evening classes, the best way to address it would be to sit with the respective university authorities and find a way to make the process of conducting them more transparent. We, therefore, feel that the UGC directive was an unthinking decision, imposed without due diligence. The most sanguine step would be to have talks with the university authorities and rethink this impractical directive.

Breach of law proves fatal

Fire in unauthorised factory

BREACH of law, more often than not, can be lethal and costly. This time it has cost the lives of at least 11 people, all workers in a plastic factory in Keraniganj, a factory that had no permission to operate. The fire occurred in a room where gas cylinders were stored causing the cylinders to explode, giving no chance to the people inside the building to escape. The condition of the injured, reported, is serious.

This tragic incident reveals a few important facets of our life which the authorities should recognise and do something about. Firstly, the disregard for law in setting up business ventures and production units is a common feature these days, made possible by the connivance of the errant parties and the local administration. Not only was the said factory unauthorised, it was also located in a densely populated area. And no one running such an illegal establishment would invest in safety measures for the workers or ensure availability of firefighting equipment to deal with fire incidents. Secondly, the exploitative treatment of the owners of these illegal establishments compels the indigent locals to surrender because of their economic condition. It is providential that the fire did not engulf the other houses, most of which are made of inflammable material.

We are told that the said factory is not the only unauthorised one in the area, and one can bet that the working conditions there also are equally unhealthy and hazardous, as such establishments are wont to be. And it is a "happy" arrangement where the local administration as well as local elected representatives—whose job it is to ensure safety of the people in their wards and communities—are made to look the other way. By their inaction, not only do they validate but also encourage others to violate the law. Unless the government runs regular drives, particularly in the outskirts of the capital, which often escapes the notice of the authorities, such incidents with pathetic consequences would be repeated.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Fire prevention is of utmost importance

Accidents related to fire in our country have been on the rise. According to reports, 16,000 fire incidents took place in the last 10 years. The accidents occurred in various factories, slums and households. Fires in Tazreen Fashions, FR Tower, and, most recently, a plastic factory in Keraniganj—to name just a few—had all shook the nation to its core. It goes without saying that fire rules and regulations must be implemented to prevent such tragic consequences.

Unfortunately, despite the high number of occurrences, the tragedies continue. I don't understand why the authorities fail to take proper measures to save the innocent lives by preventing the fires. Haven't we learned our lessons yet? How many more bodies need to burn before we take serious action? One can only imagine the extent of suffering the fire victims endure due to the lack of our safety measures.

Nur Jahan, *Chattogram*



EDITORIAL

Demise of an Icon

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

FOR Aung San Suu Kyi, December 10 could have been a date to remember. It is the day when she received her Nobel Prize in 1991. Each year on December 10, on the death anniversary of the inventor Alfred Nobel, individuals in five categories are honoured for their outstanding services. In his will, Alfred Nobel desired that one-fifth of the interest of his trust fund would be given to "the person who has done the most or best to advance fellowship among nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and the establishment and promotion of peace congresses." In 1991, Suu Kyi fitted the bill for the Nobel Peace Prize. She was even dubbed by Time magazine as one of the "Children of Gandhi" (1999) for her commitment to non-violence. For long, almost 21 years, she had been the caged bird as a political prisoner who served as a beacon of hope for freedom-loving people around the world. As the daughter of Myanmar's independence hero General Aung San, an Oxford graduate married to a Westerner, and an ex-UN employee—Suu Kyi had been the darling of the mainstream media.

However, in recent years, the world has woken up to her new avatar. The "sound" of her silence over the Rohingya massacre of genocidal proportions and its stated desire of ethnic cleansing is eerie, shocking and disturbing. It seems there are two Aung San Suu Kyis: one from pre-2015 and another from post-2015 election. The first one could have sipped tea while ruminating on her Nobel memory on December 10, while the other one had been brought to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. The Gambia, a small African country, remotely connected with the violence, summoned the Southeast Asian songbird Suu Kyi to a court in Europe for "singing from a different song sheet" ever since her landslide win in the national election. In the last few years, there have been numerous calls to revoke Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize, of which she is arguably no longer worthy; the Nobel committee disagreed.

But the matter at hand is graver than a mere shiny trinket. The Gambia's

Attorney General and Minister for Justice Abubacarr Marie Tambadou is leading a legal team to bring global attention to the gory details of the orchestrated action of Myanmar army and its goons that participated in the near annihilation of the Muslim population of Rakhine. Over a period of two decades, a total of 1.1 million Rohingyas have fled Myanmar and taken shelter in Bangladesh.

In his opening gambit, Tambadou said, "I could smell the stench of genocide from miles away when I visited the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. It was all too familiar for me, after a decade of interacting with the victims of the Rwandan mass rapes, killings and genocide."

The Gambia, for a change, not any Western power, situates itself on a moral high ground. A Least Developed Country such as Bangladesh, for a change, not

are treating the surface without getting at the root of the political problem. They know that sooner or later the funds will dry up. The world will get tired of hearing about the Rohingyas. The caravan of donors will move elsewhere following the scent of the dough. All the humanitarian rhetoric will wither away like a mirage in the desert. And Bangladesh will have to deal with the doubly deserted population: first, by their own country, and then by the world. By then, a donor-dependent population will forget the dignity of living through hard work, and resort to short-cut means, affecting the host country. Already there are signs of drug smuggling, human trafficking, prostitution, and terrorism. It is a ticking bomb, and Myanmar is the timekeeper.

The extremely optimists among us perhaps expected Suu Kyi to be different in the Hague tribunal. They were

province, Myanmar has proved the value of a relatively peaceful Rohingya-free Rakhine state for its powerful neighbour. China's interest in our deep sea port was punctured by a country who should not be named. The mass exodus on religious grounds has encouraged our other big brother to contemplate the same in their eastern provinces. It seems all the big players are keen on taking mileages from the inches of humanities that we have given. The little sign of prosperity that our economy is showing has become the target of many.

Our pain has been felt by a country at an unexpected corner of the world. Geographically, it has nothing to do with either South Asia or Southeast Asia. Yet, ostensibly supported by the OIC, the Gambia has dared to sound out the silenced voice of a stateless people. One hopes that this ongoing legal discourse



Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (left) at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, Netherlands, on December 10, 2019.

PHOTO:
REUTERS/YVES HERMAN

any Western power that prefers building walls or dealing with the refugee-seekers off-shore and deporting them at the first available opportunity, situates itself on a moral high ground. The moral compass is changing. Both Bangladesh and Gambia have expressed their national memory of experiencing genocide. Bangladesh is a grateful country as it wanted to reciprocate the humanitarian gesture that it received in 1971 from India which once sheltered 10 million refugees. The difference is: those "Joy Bangla" refugees knew at heart that they would be returning to an independent country. They had the hope because their freedom-fighting sons and daughters were waging a guerrilla warfare, while their host country was garnering international support for their winning cause.

The Rohingyas are devoid of any such hope. They have not been officially given the refugee status, which would make Bangladesh government liable for all social services and citizen rights. The donors, meanwhile, are acting like hospital emergency services dealing with patients without insurance policies. They

surprised to see her repeating a rehearsed position: that Myanmar is investigating some instances of excessive force used by her army. Suu Kyi painted the Rohingya victims as the collateral damage of an army action engaged in diffusing insurgency. The General's daughter's position will surely instil more fear in the Rohingya people who now will have all the more reasons to protest any possible attempt to relocate them to what used to be their homeland.

Suu Kyi, articulate as she is, will use her words to silence the narrative of trauma and violence. She will convolute the discourse to prolong the repatriation process, and eventually make the Rohingya issue problem and liability of Bangladesh alone. I remember one Israeli minister once saying on TV— "Who said that the Palestinians do not have a country; they have Jordan and Syria." I think we are going to hear a similar undertone in the official Myanmar narrative. Already, by giving China access to the Indian Ocean through Kyaukphyu deep sea port and the building of the Special Economic Zone in the Rakhine

will also point out how Bangladesh is being affected by another type of collateral damage: the heritage site of Cox's Bazar. Our ecology is threatened, our tourism industry is in disarray, and the local residents are seeing their poverty and rights being ignored at the expense of some sponsored guests.

Sitting in the comfort zone of my reading room, and trying to make sense of the world while surfing through the net or watching TV, can only lead me to a wall of silence. The shadow lines of the Gambia—the Netherlands—Bangladesh—Myanmar can remind one of the author Amitav Ghosh, who wrote, "I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words—that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all."

In this month of Victory, let me echo Ghosh, and say, "this silence [too] must win."

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

Have None, Will Travel

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

"YOU want me to pack me up and send me to Timbuktu?" yells Dennis Palmer, sitting at the head of the table in the meeting room. No, he is not the VP, nor any big boss, he is the technician, while the Director is sitting on top of the side cabinet as he joined the meeting late. This is the US and seats are taken on a first-come-first-served basis without any invisible assignments in accordance with rank. And Dennis, who, in a similar situation in Bangladesh, would probably have been standing with his hands clasped over his lower abdomen, his head stooped low while uttering only a barrage of "sir, sir, ..., sir", yells at Jim Campbell, the Director of the whole engineering department. But Jim calms him (Dennis) down: "It's OK, you don't have to go. Naveed, Ken and Tim will go."

I notice the grimace on the faces of Ken Klemczek and Tim Hughes. For me, I pinch myself. Yes, baby! *Phoen* trip!! Woo hoo!! Going all the way to Ulm, Germany to deal with Opel. That means flying from Detroit to Frankfurt and then two hours on the amazing Autobahn in a Mercedes to Ulm on the Danube. Not to mention flying business class, staying in five-star hotels, eating first class food, seeing a new country, experiencing a new culture and of course, driving without any speed limits! All on OPM (Other People's Money).

But this is America. A job description comes with a silent, squeamish apology if it says "travel required", more so if it says "overseas travel required". I have lost



count of how many interviews I faced feeling like a lord when the interviewers sheepishly slipped into the conversation: "Uhm, there is likely to be some travel to South America, I hope that's OK with you, but we will try to minimise it of course." Minimise? Dude, MAXIMISE! In fact, I will give you a lap dance every time you send me below the equator. If I come from a land where foreign travel is a perk.

In Bangladesh, admiration/envy is: "You're so lucky you travel overseas every month." For some reason, we take work travel as an all-expenses-paid pleasure

travel too. Hence we lobby for a trip, even for a training course despite retiring a month later.

We even lobby to go on a UN mission. I watch in awe as the young officer smiles as he boards the white jet. Yes, it is a foreign trip and earning foreign remittance, but it is nonetheless going on a combat mission into the danger zone, with loneliness, depression, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), injury and even death, as a "perk" of a foreign trip. The plaque bearing the name of the late Lt Cdr Ashraf at the Bangladesh Naval

Academy is a stark reminder of that.

Yet, we go. No problem if you have none (in terms of intentions of spending your own money), will (still) travel. Even if it is to pick up a brand-new Dreamliner from Seattle, we need to go, and not only that, but make sure the team is as big as we can make it. After all, the plane will otherwise come home empty...

Naveed Mahbub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's The Naveed Mahbub Show and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com