

File
Bangladesh

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN

3-17-00

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Sandy / @ Delaware
can we do / say
anything about this
for

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February 22, 2000

President William J. Clinton
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear President Clinton:

At the suggestion of Dr. James French, I am writing to call your attention to a truly horrifying situation that currently exists in Bangladesh. Every year hundreds of young girls become the victims of sulfuric acid burns inflicted upon them as acts of revenge by men whose advances they have spurned or who are involved in dowry or property disputes. Many of these girls die due to their injuries; those that survive are left blind, deaf, or horribly and permanently disfigured. Shame and embarrassment force them to spend the rest of their lives in hiding. Many are rejected even by their families and have no choice but to become street beggars.

The medical facilities in Bangladesh to care for these girls are woefully inadequate. There are only eight beds for female burn patients in the only public hospital in the country. The cost of treatment is prohibitively expensive for all but a few of the victims.

Recently I approached Dr. French with this story and he and Fairfax Inova Hospital very generously agreed to perform the reconstructive surgery required to give one of these girls a chance at a normal life. While I am enormously grateful to them and very excited about the difference they will make in at least one girl's life, I know that bringing these girls abroad for medical treatment is not the answer to the problem. The answer, of course, is to stop the attacks from occurring in the first place.

In spite of international outrage, the incidence of these crimes increases every year. Yet very few of the attackers are punished. In a society that places little importance on women's lives, destroying a young girl's face has become almost socially acceptable.

President Clinton, some of these girls are as young as 11 years old. At one time they all not only had beautiful faces, but dreams and ambitions and hopes for their future. Many of them speak about the plans they had to go to college, start their own business, or even become Olympic athletes. Through no fault of their own, those dreams have been taken away from them and their lives have been destroyed.

Knowing that you will be traveling to Bangladesh in March, I felt compelled to write to you and ask you to do anything you can to bring more attention to this situation, as well as to encourage the authorities in that country to put an end to these barbaric acts.

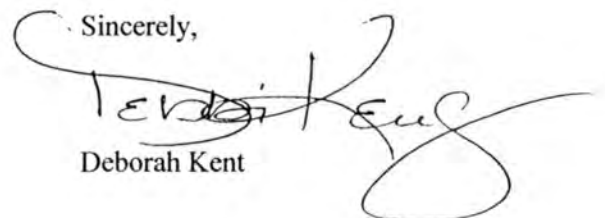
I am not an expert on this subject and I am not directly involved with any of the organizations that have been established to help these burn victims. But the pictures of these girls have continued to haunt me since I first became aware of the situation several months ago and I would like to do whatever I can to help.

The enclosed information tells this story much more convincingly than I can. I hope you'll take just a few minutes to read it.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Kent



In Bangladesh, Acid Ruins Women's Faces And Their Dreams

By Uli Schmetzer

DHAKA, Bangladesh — In a burn ward crowded with rusty cots and blood-stained linen, the acid-ravaged faces of women who dared to say no to men are hidden behind a swath of bandages. Bangladesh, an impoverished nation heavily sustained by international funding, has done little to stop jilted males from hurling sulfuric acid into the faces of women who offended their sense of machismo and their credo that men have rights over women.

The wave of acid-throwing began about seven years ago and coincided with a new thrust by women in Bangladesh to assert their rights. The women had help from micro-credits that offered them economic independence and a chance to reject marriage proposals in a society where women were traditionally passed from father to husband as serfs.

"There are no official statistics, but over 200 acid mutilations are recorded by the media in Bangladesh every year," said plastic surgeon Dr. Samanta Lal Sen. "Many cases are not made public because the girls are afraid to go to the authorities or the case is settled between families and the police."

The case of Ambia Khatun is typical. She recalls it was shortly before midnight when she was awakened by the noise of men cutting through the walls of her bamboo hut outside the town of Mymensingh. An instant later came the scorching pain as acid splashed into her face, hurled by an elderly man whose marriage proposal she had turned down. Khatun's face was burned and she was blinded for life. Some of the acid splashed on to her two small sons who are now with her in a hospital, scarred for life. The boys, ages 4 and 6, had clung to their mother, a 30-year-old widow, crying as the assailant burst through the wall.

John Morrison, a consultant for UNICEF said the problem is so serious it merits international attention.

"It's something that is kept quiet in Bangladesh. Some people are arrested, others are not. We want the government to take this seriously. It has become so bad one of the latest victims was a 12-year-old girl."

On a Muslim holiday this month, Dr. Sen was moving through the burn ward of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, pointing out that the gauze bandages on his patients' faces were old and should have been changed long ago. But gauze is in short supply, he explained. Worse, he said, he does not have the equipment to perform skin grafts, and that means an increase in infections.

His patients lie very still and very much alone. All of them once had dreams, ambitions, small business ventures and even scholarships. Now, unless their rural families have mercy on them, their destiny is to become street beggars.

"I'm better off dead. What use am I now to anyone?" said Khatun. "If I testify against this man, his family may kill me or kill my children. But I will testify. He must be punished."

She speaks with great effort through a mouth grotesquely twisted by the acid. Tears trickle from one empty eye socket; the other eye catches only a gray shimmer of light.

Bangladeshis refer to the barbarities as "these unfortunate incidents." Officials belittle the scope of the problem and attribute the cases to "ignorant men in backward parts of the country."

The stories behind the barbarities are similar. The voice of Sufia Akther comes through gauze bandages covering a face that was once beautiful, with its large lively eyes that will never see again. Sufia is 20 and had just been accepted at college, a major achievement for a poor village girl from Lakshipur, 200 miles north of Dhaka. Her great ambition was to become an agronomist.

"Now she'll probably end up as a beggar," Sen whispered.

Sufia was an accidental victim. The youth who tossed a pitcher of sulfuric acid through her bedroom window at 3 in the morning wanted to punish her sister Helen, 21, who had turned down his marriage proposal.

"Helen and I sleep in the same bed. I heard the noise and sat up. The acid hit me," said the voice below the bandages.

The youth who allegedly committed the crime has been detained, but is free on bail.

"Many cases are pending but there are few convictions. Usually the police try to convince or intimidate the woman to withdraw her case," said Salma Ali, a human-rights lawyer with the Association of Women Lawyers. She provides legal aid to eight of the victims.

"The police know who the attackers are but often won't arrest them. Even if the case goes to court, it takes years for a conviction," Ali said.

Bangladeshi law gives judges the right to impose sentences from 8 years to life imprisonment for acid throwers. Only one man has been sentenced to life, in 1995.

There is not much left of Payara Begum's face. She still moans with pain. The wounds refuse to heal. The acid thrower was the tutor of Begum's two children. A married woman, she indignantly rejected the tutor's advances and last month, in broad daylight, he tossed a can filled with acid over her.

"My husband is a good man. He comes to visit me. I hope he won't leave me now," Begum whispered.

In a country where men have the right to as many as four wives, the husband often marries a second wife if the first becomes old, ill or incapacitated.

Both lawyers and doctors agree the acid-throwing fad is a tragic byproduct of a gender revolution. In years past, men doused disobedient wives with kerosene and set them afire.

"Then, suddenly, these barbarians graduated to acid-throwing which, from a medical point of view, is far more destructive than kerosene burns," said Dr. Sen.

The phenomenon has taken on bizarre proportions. UNICEF's Morrison found out that the 12-year-old girl who had acid tossed into her face was mutilated over a land deal.

"The acid throwers figured the medical costs of caring for the girl would eliminate the rival family as competitors for the purchase of a piece of land," he said.

Some of the disfigured women, like Jamara Khatun, have been fortunate. She was one of a dozen women treated by a team of Italian plastic surgeons from the Italian branch of INTERPLASTIC, a worldwide group of Good Samaritans who came to Dhaka for two weeks last year with all their equipment and operated on some of Sen's patients. They produced amazing results in restructuring some of the devastated faces. Another six girls were taken to Spain for treatment by Spanish plastic surgeons.

But what Bangladesh really needs is equipment that allows surgeons like Sen to apply at home the skills he acquired in Germany, Austria and Britain.

Said the irate doctor, who has seen more pain than he cares to remember, "If we really want to stop the acid throwers, the law must impose exemplary punishment. The men who do this should be hung in a public square, and I personally would like to throw some acid in their faces so they'll know what it feels like."

Even a doctor's oath to respect human life has its limits. (Chicago Tribune Foreign Correspondent January 31, 1999)



Teen Launches Crusade to Stop Acid Attacks Against Women in Bangladesh

Doctors gave Bina Akhter three years to live after being attacked. That was three years ago. Today, after eight operations, her face has evolved into patchwork of skin grafts and scars. She still suffers from headaches so severe she can hardly stand. (ABCNEWS)



Before the Attack

A photograph taken of Bina Akhter before a man threw acid on her face and instantly shattered many of her dreams. (ABCNEWS)



Namita



Namita's attack took place in 1985. Her father and his brothers had enmity with this family in their home village. The enmity was so great that there had been numerous incidences of violence with grievous injuries.

Her uncles moved to Calcutta to escape this violence and feud. Only her father remained in Bangladesh but he moved to the city to teach at a school there.

One man from that family also came to live in that city. He befriended Namita's father and Namita's innocent father thought that the past was forgotten. But actually this man was secretly plotting revenge. He planned to throw acid at Namita's father. While he waited for Namita's father to come back from school he saw Namita coming. Quickly he changed his strategy. He thought it would be better to hurt the daughter, as it would effect the father more. For what could be more painful for the father than to see his daughter in such a state and be powerless to do anything about it.

He poured the acid over Namita's head. "I thought that it had started to rain. My books fell on the ground. My watch also fell and it started to melt. Even the place where the acid fell on the street started to melt. I put my hands on my face and my hands started melting too. I remember my father rushing to me and people around me shouting, "The girl won't live." I don't remember anything else. I woke up in the hospital."

Her eyes gradually deteriorated and six months later the doctors had to take them out.

But Namita's story is also a story of success, of fighting with life and emerging victorious.

"An Italian missionary helped me immensely. He practically dragged me to a blind school and forced me to start living again. I later got my S.S.C. from a normal school and got my H.S.C. from Lalmatia College and also received my BA from there."

Namita is now teaching at The Blind School for Girls in Mirpur and is also staying in the school premises.

"Do you know President Ershad came to see me on three occasions and asked what he could do for me? I said, "Nothing, because, can anybody give me back my former life?"



file Bangladesh

United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

January 10, 1995

Ms. Melanne Verveer
Office of the First Lady
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Ms. Verveer: *Melanne 1994*

I have attached a list of NGO's in Bangladesh as you requested, divided into categories such as those receiving USG funding. As you see there are a few more than several of them.

Meanwhile, we should shortly have possible schedules in Nepal and Sri Lanka. To make travel to all five countries work, an itinerary which starts in Pakistan and carries on to India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, or just the reverse, best addresses the combination of long distances and the Friday Islamic weekend.

Sincerely yours,

Tim

Acting Timothy M. Carney
~~Deputy~~ Assistant Secretary of State
for South Asian Affairs

NGO's IN BANGLADESH

A. U.S. NGOS Receiving USAID Funding:

Private Agencies Collaborating Together (Pact)
Care
Pathfinder fund (does family planning)
The Asia Foundation
Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception
Helen Keller International
Asisn-American free Labor Institute
National Democratic Institute
International Executive Service Corps
Population Council
Population Services International
Save The Children
Salvation Army World Service Office
Christian Reformed World Relief Committee
Aga Khan Foundation
World Vision Relief and Development
World Relief Corporation

B. Other U.S. NGOS in Bangladesh:

Ford Foundation
Adventist Development and Relief Agency
The Hunger Project
Food for The Hungry International
Ashoka
International Voluntary Services (IVS)
YMCA
Mennonite Central Committee
Winrock
Friends of Bangladesh (builds orphanages, schools)
Assemblies of God Mission
Association of Baptists
Bangladesh Mission (Foreign mission board of the - Southern Baptist Convention)
Christian Reformed World Relief Committee
Holy Cross Missionaries
International Christian Fellowship
Presbyterian Fellowship
World Mission Prayer League
Bangladesh Lutheran Mission

(Note: most American missionary groups are involved in health or relief work or education)

C. Local NGOS receiving significant USG assistance (over \$100,000 a year):

Concerned Women for Family Planning
Association of Development Agencies Bangladesh
Family Planning Association of Bangladesh
Graneen Trust
Jatio Torun Shangha (family planning)
Unity through Population Services
Center for Development Services (family planning)
Bangladesh Assoc. for Maternal and Neo-Natal Health
Family Development services
Polli Sishu Foundation (family planning)
Rural Family Welfare Project
Sopiret (family planning)
Swarniver (family planning)
Shamantik (family planning)
Family Planning Services and Training Center

D. Dhaka based international organization receiving significant USG assistance (over \$100,000 a year):

International Center for Diarrhoeal Disease Research/Bangladesh
(Cholera Research, including Oral Rehydration Therapy; family planning)