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We can't take it any more

The crossfire killings tarnishing country's image

NOTHING, but nothing can justify the unbridled killings in the hands of RAB that the government chooses to explain away as encounter deaths. The figures of almost six hundred deaths since April 2004 and one hundred since January this year, defy rationality. Of late, the police have chosen to follow the way of the so-called elite force, summarily putting down the victims through the very convenient but repugnant and immoral mechanism, devised since the elite force came into being, of crossfire. The recent death in so-called crossfire, of a person in police custody who was in fetters, is lawlessness at its height. To think that the people are credulous enough to believe in the police explanation in this case, that a fettered arrestee was escaping and thus shot, amounts to crediting the ability of public comprehension with no more than the level of a moron.

We are concerned because not only are these arbitrary killings is gross violation of rights of a person to the due process of law, our poor record in the field of human rights is being further dealt a severe blow.

And even if we are to believe that the purpose of establishing the special force was to arrest the very bad law and order situation obtaining in 2004, according to the admission of a senior minister, the state of law and order as of today negates that justification. The law and order is still no better than what it was in 2004. And to justify the killings on the grounds that, all those who have died in the crossfire are all known terrorists and criminals of the country, as is being done by the government, exposes lack of trust of the government itself in our judiciary.

Killing in crossfire cannot be moral, let alone a legal, act. Fundamental pillars of human civilisation, and indeed the basic tenets of our religion, accord everyone the right to protection under the law, even the most heinous of criminals. Denying it reduces the government to a primitive level where arbitrary killing was the order of the day.

Java tragedy

Our sympathies are with the people of Indonesia

WE are deeply shocked at the huge loss of lives and destruction of property in Java. Our sympathies are with the bereaved families who have lost their near and dear ones, and with the injured. We express our solidarity with the people of Indonesia and stand beside them in their hour of grief.

The tragedy and woes of the people of Indonesia are twice magnified due to the threat of imminent eruption of Mount Merapi volcano that is in close proximity of the earthquake's epicentre, both straddling the city of Yogjakarta. It is heartening to note the offer of help that Indonesia has received from many countries of and outside the region.

As we express our sympathies for the people of Indonesia, it is also time for us to again review and update the state of our own preparedness in the event that such a fate should befall us, Bangladesh being vulnerable because of its location. Doubts do exist with regard to our preparedness to face disasters of this nature and magnitude. Our concern is heightened when we find the innumerable high-rise buildings, most of which have been constructed without following the building code and without proper planning. Many such buildings stand on reclaimed lands through filling of lakes and various water bodies and are thus more vulnerable than the others.

On the other hand, many dilapidated buildings have been identified which are in a precarious state in the old parts of the city, weathered by time. Despite the fact that the administration from time to time talks of demolishing such buildings, these buildings still stand, with the prospect of disaster stalking the inmates.

Although in recent times much talks have taken place both at governmental and other levels about the state of our preparedness, we still remain highly vulnerable when we recall the poor rescue efforts in the case of two recent building collapse in the heart of the capital, of lesser magnitude, where reportedly, lack of proper equipment hampered the rescue operations.

Vandalism in garments industry: Causes must be removed

ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

The leading global buyers of Bangladeshi garments earlier expressed their deep concern about the factory compliances and welfare of the workers and categorically said that Bangladesh would face problem in exporting garments if the working condition is not improved. The recent acts of vandalism are sure to bring fore again the issue of factory compliances and workers' welfare. Such a development is full of worst economic implications for the country as this sector has pivotal role in the economy employing a record number of people and earning the highest amount of foreign currency.

THE readymade garments (RMG) industry of the country has faced a sudden spurt of unprecedented vandalism. As it appears some unruly elements instigated garment workers and went on rampage setting ablaze at least 12 factories at different points in the capital and its outskirts. One person was killed and 100 others were injured while nearly 250 garment factories and 200 vehicles were ransacked in the two-day chaos and vandalism.

According to media reports, thousands of garment workers wreaked havoc in Gazipur, Savar and Dhaka in a bid to home their demands for pay hike, arrear salaries, overtime wages, weekly holiday and other facilities. But the leaders of the association of garment industries, BGMEA, have stated to the government underscoring the point that the attacks on the garment factories were calculated acts of sabotage designed to destroy the RMG sector to benefit the commercial interests of a neighbouring country.

The government also believes a vested quarter at home and abroad was active behind the attacks on garment factories to create anarchy and hamper the growth of the RMG sector. A host of ministers including the state minister for home affairs are emphatically saying that it was an act of sabotage and conspiracy. Conspiracy, external or internal, cannot be ruled out. But a conspiracy can only be materialised when there are colossal failures and indifferences among those who exercise power without the semblance of responsibility.

The state minister for home affairs admitted to having prior intelligence information on vandalism in garment factories. One can truly raise here the issue of failure of government to protect the thriving RMG sector from which the country earns its highest share of foreign currency, despite having prior intelligence information. The statement of state minister to the effect that vandalism could not be checked due to shortage of law enforcers and lack of coordination among them, clearly testify to poor governance.

What has irritated people much is that, when their factories were set ablaze, the panicked and helpless owners entreated the government for help, but the small contingent of police and RAB deployed to the scene, not dared to face the thousands of frantic workers. The circumstantial evidence suggests that a timely and coordinated action by the law enforcers certainly would have saved the country's prime economic sector from the fatal blows.

The RMG sector has been playing a very vital role in the economy of Bangladesh. Presently more than 3000 garment units are involved in exporting both woven and knit items. Almost two million workers are working in these factories most of whom are women. The RMG sector provides jobs for over four million people including indirect employment.

This sector also stands as the premier foreign exchange earner of the country which brings in more than $ 5 million a year as export earnings, with an estimated $ 15 million more in other related industries. The RMG sector is responsible for more than 75 percent of the export earnings of the country. In fact, these are not only pleasant facts but also significant as the employment situation of the country has been squeezing continually over the last few years.

The concern of the owners of the garment factories is confined only to counting profit while the government's is for earning foreign currency. But no body cares for the poor workers--the most important component for running the industry. They are there virtually without any human right. The safety of the garment workers was never high on the agenda either of the two garment associations or the government, let alone the factory owners.

The global buyers are very much sensitive about the safety and welfare of the garment workers in Bangladesh. But their pressure has not been enough to improve the factory condition at a desirable level. The government fears that, the recent acts of vandalism in RMG sector could have a debilitating impact on export. Even a 10 percent fall in export could mean a loss of $ 850 million, which is much higher than the earning from any other sector, except remittances.

Certainly, there is no denying that the garment workers are the victims of extreme exploitation and the issue of their welfare has all along been neglected. An amount of Tk 1000-1200 which they usually get as wage does not commensurate with their hard labour. Moreover they are forced to do overtime duty without being paid as per rule. Many of the garment units are most irregular in payment of wages, and the poor workers eventually bear the brunt of police excesses while agitating for realisation of wages.

The far-reaching consequences of the acts of vandalism in garment factories may be devastating for foreign investment as the incidents have widely been covered by the foreign media. The theory of conspiracy by some rival country has become less credible as there is little evidence of pro-poor behaviour of the owners of garment factories. Rather it speaks emphatically that the owners drive luxury cars and live beyond their means exploiting the poor workers. The piled up anger of the garment workers, deprived for years of their genuine right and privileges, was just exploded and this was bound to happen.

The government, garment factory owners and workers on May-24 have reached a consensus to resolve the stand off in the RMG sector in tripartite meeting. A 'minimum wage board' has already been formed to deal exclusively with the wages of garment workers revising the previous one which was last updated in 1994. It was alleged in the meeting that the minimum wage of Tk. 930, which was fixed in 1994, was yet to be implemented in many garment units.

One needs to look into the working condition of the garment workers while not ruling out entirely the freak episodes of the owners. The government should appraise the nation of the real situation, separating the facts from the fictions and must act urgently to redress the grievances of the garment workers. There must be laws stipulating safe working condition. Everybody should remember that, it is the sweat of the workers that bring fortune for the country.

The leading global buyers of Bangladeshi garments earlier expressed their deep concern about the factory compliances and welfare of the workers and categorically said that Bangladesh would face problem in exporting garments if the working condition is not improved. The recent acts of vandalism are sure to bring fore again the issue of factory compliances and workers' welfare which would strengthen the hands of the ally formed by the global buyers. Such a development is full of the worst economic implications for the country as this sector has pivotal role in the economy employing a record number of people and earning the highest amount of foreign currency.

ANM Nurul Haque is a banker.

War on Iran not necessarily inevitable

M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

The very fact that Iran and America are going to open a channel of communication is a positive development with regard to solving the imbroglio facing the western world on Iran's nuclear ambition. Iran's supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei has said that Teheran will not accept American 'bullying' and will use the occasion of probable talk to make them understand Iran's views. And the Americans will surely find Iran's Mullahs the hard nut to crack. There is however vital meeting point between the two: neither side wants Iraq to descend into a civil war for their own reason.

THE Bush Administration is obsessed with Iran today as President George Bush was about Iraq in the early years of the supposed American century with the dream of a new Holy Roman empire -- by the US this time -- floating in his imagination. At home, there existed a perfect consensus with none having differing ideas about Bush's mega strategic project or another world view for America. Yet a recalcitrant Iran with its nuclear ambition stood out as a sore thumb in the path of the US' march towards her destined powerhood.

The tepidity of the US' relations with Iran dates back to the country's 1979 Islamic revolution and the days when the US' diplomats were held hostage in Tehran causing serious embarrassment to a superpower. The revolution also overthrew the Shah, an US ally and caused major setback to the US' sway in the region. Iran was the only Muslim country to give a bloody nose to the US -- a fact the Americans still find hard to forget. It wasn't absolutely without a reason that in 2002 the US first included Iran amongst the 'axis of evil' countries. On the part of Iran its criticism of the US stems from her deep nexus with Israel which Iran terms as 'fake state' that "cannot logically continue to live."

In return Israel upped the rhetoric when its Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reiterated Israeli determination 'to make sure that no one has the capability or power to commit destruction against us.' Except for some years in 1990s under the reformist president Muhammad Khatami a fierce war of words continued between the US and Iran.

With the election of President Mahmud Ahmedinejad in January 2006 Iran's belligerency has grown stronger. His fiery statements on Israel viz 'wiping off the face of the earth' or 'a tu mour' that should be relocated, has unnerved both Israel and its western patrons.

Iranian President's inflammatory speeches are, no doubt, offending but can be rationalised when seen in the backdrop of Bush's neoconservative ideology. Like a committed revolutionary President Nejad wants to distance himself from both Rafsanjani and Khatami -- both former Iranian presidents -- who allegedly made substantial concessions to the US thus vitiating the 'spirit of Islamic revolution.' He also wants to win the support of Muslim masses throughout the world who are smarting under the US' occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Given this background of US-Iran relations the fears of another war or military strike against Iran by the US and Israel combine, with or without consent from UNSC, China, Russia or even the EU or at least UN sanctions abound -- even if a myriad of arises are already raging in the region.

But the driving power behind the forces arrayed against Iran -- the US itself -- is not happily placed to say the least. Its trade imbalance with the rest of the world is around $700bn and likely to reach the astronomic figure of $1 trillion by the time George Bush leaves the office. Its army is bogged down in Iraq in ways reminiscent of Vietnam. It has antagonised the Muslim world with its apathy for the Palestinians, brutal treatment of alleged Al-Qaeda prisoners and 'colateral' damage caused to thousands of Afghan and Iraqi civilians in the name of war on terror.

On the contrary it has by its default given a new lease of life to Al-Qaeda terrorists and ensured its globalisation. Before long the US will have to recall its army out of Iraq in response to its own public pressure. The situation is getting far worse in Afghanistan with the resurgent Taliban already in clash with Karzai's reluctant defenders from the international security forces.

In the meantime a war weariness has already set in America with 2400 body bags already sent there from Iraq alone. The US has apparently failed to make any dent either in the ferocity of insurgency or the sectarian violence facing Iraq. It is difficult to understand how will they have stomach for another war in far more tricky terrain of Iran. The question is often asked: Can America undertake any kind of military action in Iran with continued bloodshed in Iraq and Afghanistan where its hands are still full with unfinished agenda.

It is clear that Iran will not yield so easily to the west's demand to stop uranium enrichment. It will possibly lay a 'beartrap' for a bungling US to provoke it into acting rashly and make fresh mistakes. Driven by its present predicaments the US has, at long last been exploring the possibility of direct talks with Iran on the Iraqi situation. It is pointer both to her deepening problems in Iraq and willingness to come to terms with Iran's burgeoning clout. Although the pessimists already called the ensuing talk 'a dialogue of the deaf,' the very fact that Iran and America are going to open a channel of communication is a positive development with regard to solving the imbroglio facing the western world on Iran's nuclear ambition.

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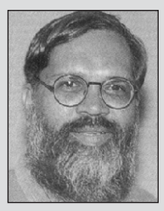
Anti-quota stir is misguided: In defence of affirmative action



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

The UPA government did well to uphold the principle. Wisely, it didn't resort to the undesirable device of phased implementation. But it will have to increase the total number of seats in Central educational institutions by 54 percent within a year, at estimated expense of Rs 8,000 crores. This is a formidable, but worthwhile, task. One can only hope that the upper castes accept reservations in the spirit of a caring-

AS students from India's privileged educational institutions continue their protests against reservations for the lower castes (OBCs), it becomes clear that the agitation is an organised affair.

Three groups have played a critical role in it: upper caste-dominated guilds like the Indian Medical Association; industrialists and owners of private colleges, who oppose any extension of reservations even for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes; and Bharatiya Janata Party politicians.

Among those who joined the agitation were Information Technology executives, and "event management" specialists, who charge hefty fees. Industrial tycoons tried to kill AA in collegesso it can't be extended to private business.

A year's delay in quota implementation means that capitation-fee colleges and private institutions, with an intake of over 534,000 students, make landfall profits of Rs 1,000-2,500 crores by selling seats meant for OBCs.

Regrettably, even the National Knowledge Commission played a partisan role in the whole business. First, it publicly opposed OBC reservation. Then, two of its members quit, adding grist to the anti-AA mill.

The agitation's rationale had nothing to do with the public interest. Rather, it was a highly individualistic urge to defend privilege. The bulk of the agitators are children of the new middle class which has burgeoned under post-1991skewed, inequality-enhancing, economic policies.

Many of them don't see their own unprecedented prosperity and rising incomes as the result of larger economic processes, such as higher rates of savings, macro-economic policies, or globalisation, which has generated new divisions of labour, creating opportunities, for instance, in IT and related services.

Even less are they aware that their own prosperity is the obverse of the squalor of the majority and the further squeezing of India's most backward regions. Rather, they attribute it to their own "merit" and initiative, thus perpetuating the status quo.

The agitation targeted the fundamental principle of AA itself. Had it succeeded, India would have lost the hard-earned gains of the social reform movement and turned its back on the imperative of correcting the distortions and inequalities caused by unbalanced growth.

The agitation's supporters take refuge behind many specious (or half-valid) arguments: that AA will kill "merit"; that OBCs are already fairly well-represented in many professions, according to a 1999 National Sample Survey Organisation estimate; and the benefits of quotas will inevitably be cornered by the OBCs' affluent, influential "creamy layer".

The "merit" argument is bogus in a society based on inheritance of property, and privilege related to birth. This means that the affluent are at a vastly different starting-point from the disadvantaged. Merit makes sense only when it measures the distance between the starting-point and the end-point. Most upper-caste people enjoy unfair advantage because of their higher starting-point.

Merit is only one, small, component of achievement. It isn't easy to measure, quantify or compare. In public recruitment or admissions, other criteria are equally relevant: for instance, gender, ethnic, and regional balance, and diversity.

The fundamental point is that a person born in an educated upper-crust family will have a totally different universe of knowledge and social contactsand wholly different access to information about the availability of colleges and courses, career options, professional advice, etc. S/he can always call "Uncle" so-and-so in the civil service or the medical profession to get tips.

Typically, such advantage outweighs differences of wealth. Past discrimination continues to produce inequality of opportunity even when there is no discrimination at present. The critical issue is how to level the playing field so as to give genuinely equal opportunity to the disadvantaged.

Affirmative action offers the best solution. It can take many forms, including voluntary targets for recruitment of disadvantaged groups, special counselling, diversity promotion programmes, etc. Reservations, admittedly, are a rather blunt instrument. It can be validly argued that India has used reservations as the sole form of AA. But we should not make the best an enemy of the good.

As for the argument that OBCs have nearly the same representation as their population share in numerous professions, the evidence from NSSO is dubious. NSSO is simply not equipped to identify local caste groups. That's is the job of specialised anthropologists, sociologists and historians familiar with caste configurations which vary from district to district.

The "creamy layer" argument is certainly valid. Social and educational backwardness is a changing phenomenon. There is upward mobility among the OBCs. But their upper layers need not automatically corner quotas. They should be excluded from doing so along the criteria specified by the Supreme Court in the Mandal judgment.

After all, at maximum, only half of India's OBCs (52 percent of total population) can get accommodated under the 27 percent quota. This must be the lower half.

It would be ideal in the long term if different institutions could devise varying AA formulas based upon different criteria besides casteincluding gender, economic status of family, quality of parents' schooling, backwardness of region of origin, etc. Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University has a decade-old admissions policy which gives extra points to OBCs, women and regional backwardness over and above a candidate's entrance examination score. This has significantly raised JNU's OBC intake.

Some social scientists have proposed AA formulas assigning different weights to these factors. Despite their drawbackse.g. wantonly opening up the settled SC/SC quota issue, or providing at best a marginal boost to OBCsthese proposals should be seriously debated.

However, the topmost priority last fortnight was to beat back the challenge posed by the anti-quota agitation, which opposed the very principle of affirmative action.

The UPA government did well to uphold the principle. Wisely, it didn't resort to the undesirable device of phased implementation. But it will have to increase the total number of seats in Central educational institutions by 54 percent within a year, at estimated expense of Rs 8,000 crores.

This is a formidable, but worthwhile, task. One can only hope that the upper castes accept reservations in the spirit of a caring-and-sharing society.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.