

If it isn't crossfire, what is it?

Denial cannot make the problem disappear

We are heartened by reassurances from the chiefs of the Army and the police that there are no misunderstandings between the two agencies during a joint press conference in Cox's Bazar on August 5. We expect nothing less from the two disciplined forces. However, we are flabbergasted by the IGP's comment that "crossfire" is an NGO creation. Are we to disregard the 107 incidents of "shootouts" in Cox's Bazar, including 48 in Teknaf, which were recorded by this daily and other newspapers over the last few years—during which at least 184 people were killed? Are we to believe that since the IGP claimed that crossfire does not exist, it will simply disappear? What about all the police statements of them being attacked and the so-called exchanges of fire leading to deaths? If it is not "crossfire", will he tell us what it is? Friendly fire?

Such denials only lead to a lack of accountability, and it is because of lack of accountability that some police personnel think that in the name of fighting drug addiction and terrorism they have a license to kill. Rogue police officials who will hear these denials will take it as an endorsement of their practice and continue with impunity.

We have seen how, in other parts of the world, rogue elements within the law enforcement bodies get involved in criminal activities because they are not held accountable and are seldom punished for breach of discipline. In this country, we also have mechanisms of accountability in place but they are structurally weak and have become ineffective over time due to lack of effective implementation. Sweeping denials like the one made by the IGP on Wednesday will further deepen this malaise.

Before taking over, the current IGP had said he would turn the police into a pro-people force. Essentially that means that every citizen, regardless of their crime, has a right to the due process of law. Therefore, instead of denying what citizens know to be a reality, we urge him to keep his promise and address the problems head-on with honesty and determination.

Randomly cutting off illegal internet connections

It will cause a major inconvenience for the users

A photo published in this daily on Thursday, where a Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) staffer is seen severing a glut of wires hung from electric pillars in Dhanmondi, Dhaka, brings to light the thoughtless way our city authorities are trying to solve a long-lasting problem. Apparently, the man was severing the wires as part of a DNCC drive to cut off illegal internet connections by service providers operating in the area. The question is, why did the authorities allow the service providers to give these connections in the first place? Did they think of the public inconvenience their action would create prior to starting the drive?

These fibre optic cables have been there for years under the very nose of the city authorities and now suddenly they have realised that they need to cut them off. Taking such a random action means that hundreds of internet users of the areas involved will be without internet and will not be able to work or study from home. Although these are illegal connections, the subscribers are paying bills for this. And during this time of the pandemic when people's movements are restricted and they are confined at their homes, it will create further problems for them. The city authorities are accountable to the public and they should have thought about how the public would be affected by their action. Also, cutting off these connections will not ensure that the internet service providers will refrain from providing such connections in the future.

Similarly, we often see eviction drives being conducted by the administration to demolish illegal structures and reclaim public land and water bodies. However, such drives hardly yield any result as the land or water body recovered by them are reoccupied within a very short time. This happens as the land grabbers are hardly punished for their illegal activities.

In the present case, the authorities should have taken some rational, well-thought-out measures through holding discussions with the internet service providers, instead of randomly cutting off the connections. Although such drives may have some legal justifications, creating public inconvenience without putting in place an alternative arrangement is in no way acceptable.

We urge our city mayors to take practical steps to deal with the issue. They must make sure that the service providers comply with the rules regarding providing the connections. City corporation officials and staffers should remain constantly vigilant about the illegal practices and legal action should be taken against those service providers who are found to be providing connections in an illegitimate way.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Justice for Major Sinha

It is extremely disturbing to think of the manner in which 36-year-old former army major Sinha Md Rashed Khan was shot dead at the Shamlapur police check post in Baharchhara, Teknaf. According to a report, Sinha's associate Sifat stated that police outpost in-charge inspector Liaquat Ali shot Sinha without any questioning, but a case filed with Teknaf model police station claimed that Liaquat Ali fired shots to protect himself and his associates as Sinha drew a gun.

But then a report in this daily sheds further light on the situation based on a statement provided by Sinha's sister—that it was indeed a murder. Whatever the motivation or the actual case, the truth must come out. A fair investigation is essential. Hopefully, justice will be served.

Jahangir Kabir, Dhaka

A tale of a tragedy and a farce

Lebanon's ticking time bomb finally explodes



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

FOR the people of Lebanon, it was business as usual on Tuesday, August 4, 2020. Post-Eid holidays, the desperate people—struggling to feed themselves and their loved ones—were out in search of livelihood and subsistence. As the day neared its end, little did they know that it was going to be the last for many of them.

First there was a fire, and then an earth-shaking, glass-shattering, mind-numbing explosion. Then a surreal mushroom cloud of smoke over the Beirut sky, followed by panic, chaos and commotion. The shockwave triggered by the explosion went on to damage buildings as far as 10 kilometres away, reports CNN—all thanks to the 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate dumped unsecured in Hanger 12 of the Beirut port (a few minutes' distance from the city's commercial and shopping districts) for six years!

According to the country's prime minister, Hassan Diab, the chemical had been stored in the warehouse "without preventive measures". He has promised an investigation. Beirut was declared a "disaster city" by the authorities on August 5, as the nation tried to come to terms with another tragedy. A two-week state of emergency has been declared by the country's cabinet, which has also put under house arrest all Beirut port officials who were responsible for storage and security from 2014. The military has been instructed to enforce the house arrest.

But this incident, one of the most shocking in the country's recent history, has raised an important question: why had the past governments not disposed of the chemical since it was confiscated way back in 2014? Were they unaware of the existence of the chemical? Apparently, not.

An Al Jazeera report suggests that the chemical was being shipped on a Russia-owned cargo vessel from Georgia to Mozambique in 2013, when in

September of that year it had to dock at the Beirut port after encountering technical difficulties. The owner and crew of the vessel had to abandon it apparently because the Lebanese authorities did not allow it to sail. The chemical was later offloaded to Hanger 12 of the port, where it remained till the explosion ripped through the capital on August 4.

One might wonder why no one ever raised a flag. But they did, and on six different occasions, as per the Al Jazeera report. Shafiq Merhi—the then-director of Lebanese Customs—on June 27, 2014 wrote a letter to an unnamed "Urgent Matters judge", informing them of the matter and seeking a solution. On December 5, 2014, May 6, 2015, May 20,

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A man is evacuated at the site of a massive explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, on August 4, 2020. PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMED AZAKIR

2016, October 13, 2016, and October 27, 2017, customs officials sent letters seeking guidance.

What is interesting here is that between 2013 and 2020, the country has seen four prime ministers: Najib Mikati (who left office on February 15, 2014), Tammam Salam (who left office on December 18, 2016), Saad Hariri (who left office on January 21, 2020), and the incumbent Hassan Diab, who took office on January 21, 2020. All these administrations had either failed to see the danger that lurked in Beirut Port or were too busy serving themselves to take notice of the 2,750 tonnes of explosives lying unsecured in the country's main port.

Given the history of the chemical in triggering man-made disasters on multiple occasions, there are specific regulations for the safe storage of ammonium nitrate. And letting 2,750 tonnes sit in one cramped space is certainly not one of them.

The Lebanese ruling class is perceived as a select group of elite-class individuals who exploit public resources for private gains. The economic free fall of the nation only reinforces the negative public image of the governments. The country is on the

are struggling with poverty and hunger. It added, "Lebanon is going through an economic crisis, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since September last year, prices for basic items such as food and shelter have soared by 169 percent, while unemployment has risen by 35 percent in the formal sector, and up to 45 percent in the informal sector. Inflation further decreased the purchasing power of families, which plummeted by 85 percent."

Middle East Eye reported a dire warning by the acting country director of Save the Children in Lebanon, Jad Sakr, saying, "We will start seeing children dying from hunger before the end of the year."

And in the wake of the pandemic, the lack of foreign currency meant not being able to procure necessary medical supplies. This has resulted in fewer options of medical treatment for Covid-19 infected patients. According to Al Arabiya News, the American University of Beirut has recently fired 850 staff members mostly from the university's medical centre, triggering public protests. ICUs were already running short of beds for the patients, and now with

no other option but to seek reform of its corrupt political system.

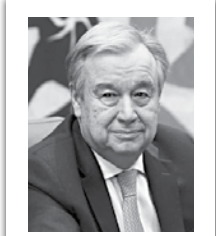
While the explosion on August 4 was a shock, it was a long time coming. Lebanon, with its abject failure as a democracy in protecting the interests of the people, is a lesson for other democracies where the centre is becoming too detached from the people, too self-absorbed for its own good. The explosion at Beirut port has been blamed on negligence. But the question remains: whose negligence? Was it the government that failed to rectify the flaws in the administration (or perhaps even fed on it)? The judges who did not reply to letters from the port customs officials? The port officials themselves? Or the people who allowed such a corrupt system to stay in place for so many years?

While nations need to support Lebanon in coping with the losses caused by this man-made disaster, they should revisit their own democratic structures to avert similar failures in the future. No one knows where another bulk of ammonium nitrate is lying unsecured, ready to combust.

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75TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI ATOMIC BOMBINGS

Time to end the nuclear menace



ANTÓNIO GUTERRES

THIS month marks the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when humanity learned of the devastation a single nuclear bomb can unleash. The lingering suffering caused to the survivors, the *hibakusha*, should give us daily motivation to eliminate all nuclear arms. They have shared their stories so the horror experienced by Hiroshima and Nagasaki will never be forgotten. Yet the nuclear threat is growing once more.

A web of agreements and instruments has been constructed to prevent the use of these uniquely destructive weapons and ultimately to eliminate them. But that framework has idled for decades and is starting to erode. The potential that nuclear weapons will be used—intentionally, accidentally, or as a result of miscalculation—is dangerously high.

Fueled by mounting international tensions and the dissolution of trust, relations between countries that possess nuclear weapons are devolving into dangerous and destabilising confrontations. As governments lean heavily on nuclear weapons for security, politicians are trading heated rhetoric about their possible use and devoting vast sums of money to improving their lethality—money that would be much better spent on peaceful, sustainable development.

For decades, nuclear testing led to horrific human and environmental



People pray in front of the cenotaph for the victims of the 1945 atomic bombing in Hiroshima. PHOTO: REUTERS

consequences. This relic of a former age should be confined there forever. Only a legally-binding, verifiable prohibition on all nuclear testing can achieve this. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has proven its worth, yet some states have still to sign or ratify the treaty, preventing it from fulfilling its full potential as an essential element in the framework to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Along with climate change, nuclear weapons represent an existential threat to our societies. Most of the roughly

13,000 nuclear arms currently in global arsenals are vastly more destructive than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Any use would precipitate a humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions.

It is time to return to the shared understanding that a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought, to the collective agreement that we should work towards a world free of nuclear weapons, and to the spirit of cooperation that enabled historic progress towards their

elimination.

The United States and the Russian Federation, as the possessors of some 90 percent of nuclear weapons, are expected to lead the way. The "New START" treaty retains verifiable caps. Its extension for five years would buy time to negotiate new agreements, including by potentially bringing in other countries possessing nuclear weapons.

Next year, the United Nations will host the Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), one of the most successful international security agreements. It contains the only treaty-based commitments undertaken by the five largest nuclear-armed countries to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons and imposes verifiable obligations not to acquire or develop nuclear weapons. Its near universal membership means the vast majority of the international community is bound by these commitments. The NPT Review Conference is an opportunity to stem the erosion of the international nuclear order.

Fortunately, most United Nations member-states remain committed to the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. This is reflected in the 122 countries that supported the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. They understand that the consequences of any use of nuclear arms would be catastrophic. We cannot risk another Hiroshima or Nagasaki or worse. As we reflect on the suffering of the *hibakusha*, let us view this tragedy as a rallying cry for humanity and recommit to a world free of nuclear weapons.

António Guterres is UN Secretary-General.