

Floods to continue and so will people’s suffering

Govt needs efficient planning for relief and rehabilitation

ACCORDING to the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC), water levels in different rivers of the country may rise again by the end of this month and may continue to rise till mid-September, leading to fresh flooding in some areas. Reportedly, although water levels in all major rivers, including the Padma, Jamuna, Brahmaputra and Kushira, are showing a falling trend, seven rivers at eight points across the country are still flowing above the danger level. This is concerning because people already have suffered so much due to prolonged flooding. However, according to experts, there is no possibility of severe flooding in these areas.

Around 40 percent of the country was inundated by flooding this year. According to the latest report of the National Disaster Response Coordination Centre (NDRCC), over 54 lakh people have so far been affected by floods and they had to endure such sufferings for about 45 days in phases. The number of flood shelters were inadequate compared to the number of people who needed it. Only 40,000 people along with their livestock took shelter at flood shelters in different districts, according to the FFWC report. Floods have damaged crops worth about Tk 350 crore till mid-July. Many farmers fear they will not be able to cultivate Aman paddy in the upcoming months as most of their seedbeds have been destroyed.

As the overall flood situation is improving across the country, it is time for the government to take proper rehabilitation programmes and run relief operations efficiently. Reconstructing or repairing the damaged infrastructure and embankments should be a priority for the government. Those who have lost all their belongings to floods would need the government’s support in rebuilding their homes and those who lost their livelihoods need help to earn a living.

Crisis of safe drinking water is a major issue in the affected areas which needs to be addressed with due importance. The government’s medical teams should immediately start providing treatment to the people who have been suffering from various water-borne diseases. Besides, farmers should be provided with Aman seedlings immediately as those need to be planted by this month. And preparations should be in place to face fresh floods in the new areas.

The prime minister has given specific directives to deal with these issues in a recent cabinet meeting. We hope the government authorities concerned will follow these directives on an urgent basis.

Freedom of expression and assembly are our rights

The authorities must ensure we are able to exercise them freely

BETWEEN 2009 and 2018, at least 507 people were subjected to enforced disappearances, according to the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights. Of them, 62 people were found dead, 286 returned alive, and the whereabouts of 159 are still unknown. In a recent press release, Amnesty International referred to these statistics and urged the Bangladesh government to immediately stop all attacks on those peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and urgently investigate these disappearances, which they believe are mainly targeting people who express their dissenting political opinions.

We are increasingly disturbed by and concerned about the rising number of these disappearances in Bangladesh, and the normalisation of this trend of people being ‘picked up’, often without a warrant, and being detained without proper legal procedures being followed, or allowing them access to legal counsel. Added to that is the threat of the draconian Digital Security Act, which has already been used on numerous occasions to silence journalists, cartoonists, students, teachers and others with critical opinions expressed through social media posts.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees that every citizen shall have the right to assemble and to participate in public meeting and processions peacefully, and that all citizens have the right to freedom of speech and expression. Why then, are we still seeing cases like the Barguna police’s attack on a human chain organised to demand the release of Shahadul Islam Sefat, a graduate student of Stamford University, as detailed in the Amnesty press release? Why were 1,325 people arrested under the DSA in 2019—an average of three detentions per day? Why has DSA detentions crossed the 500 mark in the first half of 2020 alone?

The right to criticise and question the authorities, and the ability to express our views as citizens and argue our differences in opinions, are the cornerstones of a functional democracy. We urge the authorities to promptly investigate the occasions where the freedom of assembly and expression have been violated, and to ensure that voices of dissent are not being silenced due to the fear of reprisals.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Stay safe while travelling

It was reported recently in this paper that in a rush to travel home and come back over the Eid holidays, at least 242 people were killed and 331 injured in 201 road accidents across the country, while 74 people were killed, 39 injured and 17 remained missing in 33 accidents on waterways.

The authorities definitely need to intervene more strictly and ensure that the root causes for such accidents are eliminated and at the same time, the commuters too must do what they are supposed to and act responsibly.

Why is it that we realise the importance of safety only after it’s too late? It has cost countless lives and will continue to do so unless strict measures are taken.

Saif Lokman, Chattogram

Deadly encounters

Time to hold institutions accountable too



While there’s still a long way to go for the case to be actually resolved in court, at least the family can get some solace in the news that seven police personnel accused in the case have been denied bail and sent to jail. Three, including Teknaf police station’s Officer-in-Charge (OC) Pradip Kumar Das, Baharchhara police outpost’s Inspector Liakat Ali, who shot Sinha, and Sub-Inspector Nanda Dulal Rakkhit have been placed on a seven-day remand, and the cops in custody have been suspended from their duties. The prime minister herself has promised Sinha’s grieving mother a fair investigation, justice and financial support, and as per her instruction, a joint probe body, with representatives from the army and police, has begun an independent investigation.

All of this is certainly commendable, but despite the outrage surrounding Sinha’s murder, woefully little attention is being paid to the broader issue of extrajudicial killings for which state institutions, and not just individuals, must be held accountable. In fact, there appears to be deliberate manoeuvres by relevant actors to paint this murder as an “isolated incident”, which signal that the state is adopting it’s preferred policy when it comes to extrajudicial killings: staunch refusal to acknowledge the extent and gravity of the problem and its own complicity in creating the Frankenstein it now wants to put in remand.

The police IGP wants to go so far as to claim that “crossfire” is an NGO invention. And while I am no etymologist, I can’t help but point out that the term “crossfire” is actually an invention of our law enforcement agencies. Isn’t it they who make up elaborate narratives about how they were caught in “crossfires” and “gunfights” and had no option but to shoot at the victim in question, even though there are very few, if any, records of bullet-hit or injured policemen in these incidents? If the IGP has an issue with the term “crossfire”, we are perfectly okay to use the term extrajudicial killings, thank you very much.

Here’s another term for him to consider: custodial deaths. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, around 1,000 out of at least 2,850 victims of “shootouts, gunfights or crossfires” since 2004 were killed after their arrest, detention or surrender to the police. Victims’ families and/or witnesses say they were picked up from their homes by law enforcers and found dead hours, days, or at times, even weeks later. A recent report by *The Daily Star* highlights that in many instances police claim that the victim accompanied them on a raid but was caught in the line of fire when, in true Dhaliwood style, armed villains emerged from the shadows and started shooting at them. And true to the genre, our law enforcers seem to be blessed with the superhuman ability of dodging bullets—what else explains why it is always the suspect, and never the cops, who get hit?

Even if we accept our law enforcers’ accounts at face value, they still must answer for the deaths of these suspects while in their custody, as per Section

328 (a) of the Police Regulation which reads: “The officer-in-charge of a police station or post shall be responsible for the safe custody of all prisoners brought to the station or post.” The Criminal Procedure code also guarantees specific legal rights to citizens when they are in legal custody and provides guidelines on how public officials ought to act when dealing with an accused person. In addition, the Torture and Custodial Death (Prohibition) Act, 2013 clearly specifies death during an arrest or an interrogation by law enforcement agency in its definition of “custodial death”. The existence of these laws would certainty have been comforting had it not been for the fact that no law enforcement member has ever been held responsible for the “mysterious” deaths of Bangladeshi citizens in their custody, and there seems to be no mechanism in place that allows us to hold institutions accountable for their failure to investigate and punish perpetrators.

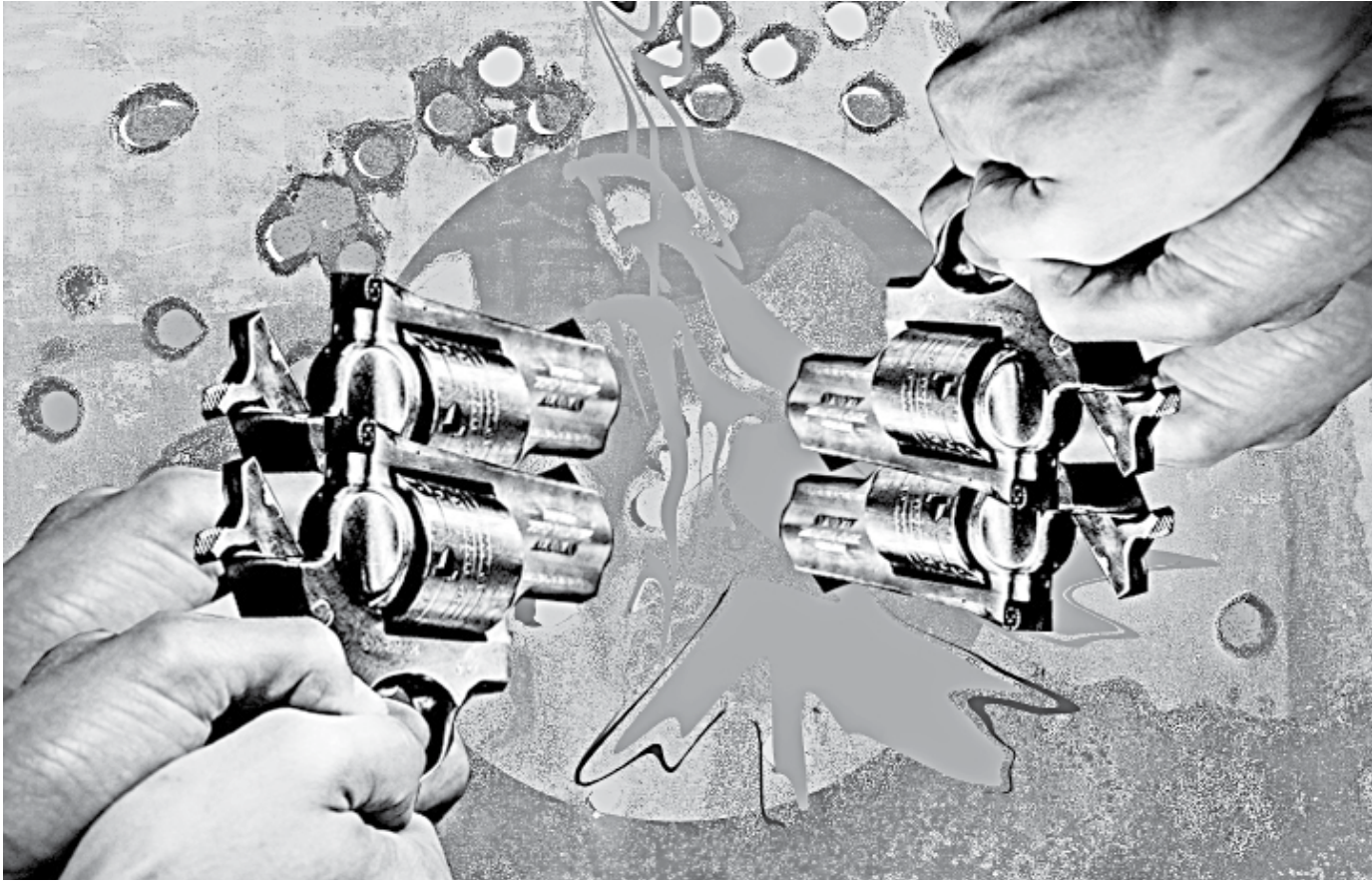
It doesn’t take a political analyst to figure out that had it not been for

informed and engaged when it comes to grave allegations against his own boys—allegations which have been raised time and again by national and international media and rights organisations, including the Human Rights Committee which made a number of recommendations to the State to strengthen the law, prosecute perpetrators and protect the right to life of persons. But he’s a busy man, with a lot on his mind, so here’s a recap of the reported numbers of such deaths from the past years to refresh his memory: in this year alone, at least 196 people have been victims of extrajudicial killings and custodial deaths; in 2019, 388 people were killed and in 2018, when the infamous “war on drugs” was launched, at least 466 were killed in such “encounters”, according to data compiled by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) from media reports.

The second accused in the Sinha case, Pradip Kumar Das, is himself implicated in at least 161 incidents of extrajudicial killings since he took charge of Teknaf police station just two years ago, and

by citing its most-quoted excuse: a gunfight. If this tragedy proves anything at all, it is that law enforcement members’ justification of trigger-happy responses as “self-defence” cannot be taken-for-granted under any circumstance. Those of us who have followed such cases before know that the official version of most so-called gunfight cases have gaping holes in them which, if scrutinised as carefully as the Sinha case, would reveal some horrific truths about those entrusted with the sacred responsibility of protecting us. Appeals to the state to investigate these deaths through an impartial body have been rejected by successive regimes, and it is this culture of impunity which has emboldened certain law enforcement members to murder in cold blood and now needs to be put on the dock.

“Crossfires” seem to have become increasingly normalised over the years, so much so that it is now espoused openly in the national parliament as a preferred action to due process by MPs in tackling petty crimes or rape. That accused offenders have a right to life and to a fair



COLLAGE-ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Sinha’s background as a retired army personnel and his service as a member of the Special Security Force tasked with guarding the prime minister, this case would have reached the same fate as that of thousands of so-called crossfire cases over the decade(s). At best, it would be reported and recorded by rights organisations as yet another state violation for which justice and accountability is demanded, but never achieved. Even the high-profile case of Teknaf municipality councillor Akramul Haque has not seen any progress over the past two years, despite promises from the Home Ministry and the National Human Rights Commission that an independent probe would be carried out.

When contacted by *The Daily Star*, the home minister said the incident happened so long ago that he could hardly comment on it without “looking at the proper documents”. He further claimed that he had “no knowledge [about other incidents of extrajudicial killings]” (*The Daily Star*, August 8, 2020). One would have hoped that as home minister he would be a little more

has made multiple public statements endorsing “crossfires” and threatening to set houses of drug addicts and pedlars on fire. That he is ruthless and immoral is no news to anyone familiar with the socio-political terrain of Teknaf. Some media outlets and rights organisations have previously highlighted the highly questionable circumstances under which alleged drug dealers and peddlers were killed in Teknaf, but the state never registered, much less took these allegations seriously. Rather, he was awarded with the Bangladesh Police Medal award in 2019 for his contribution to the force in six incidents where the accused in question were all killed in so-called crossfires. The state can now congratulate itself all it wants for “justice ensured”, but simply sending him to remand to appease the masses (read: its most esteemed elite force) will not cleanse the blood off its hands.

It is now apparent from the contradictions in the FIR report, inquest report and sudden disappearance of witnesses to the Sinha murder that the perpetrators tried to cover up the incident

trial seems to be lost on all concerned, and even the premise of calls for justice for Sinha’s murder seems to rest on the fact that he was innocent. But what if he was not? How is this relevant to the discussion about whether or not the state used excessive force against him and robbed him off his rights accorded by the Constitution of Bangladesh and several international human rights treaties to which Bangladesh is a signatory?

Sinha, the son of a freedom fighter and former deputy secretary to the Finance Ministry, arouses our collective sympathy in ways the unnamed, unimportant petty drug dealer, discovered with an umpteenth number of yaba tablets, does not. And while our constitution does not allow us to choose whose lives matter and whose does not, our lawmakers and law enforcers seem to have taken it upon themselves to play judge, jury and executioner, forgetting that in the process, they are the ones making a mockery of the rule of law and eroding the state’s moral authority over its populace.

Sushmita S Preetha is a journalist and researcher.

Who are the youth, anyway?

KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

IF you had told me at the start of this century that the word “youth” would become a key addition to our everyday lives in about 20 years or so, I would not understand you. And not because I was an eight-year-old child back then, but mostly for how different things were at the time. Politics meant larger-than-life characters talking loudly at people. The ones who cared for the environment wore white lab coats and goggles. And people seldom dressed casual for business and made money over the phone.

The world has revolved around the sun about 20 times since then; in the same time, young people have transformed generations.

What does it mean to be a “youth” anyway? Where does it begin and end? Is it tangible or abstract?

The United Nations defines, “Youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence. That’s why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups.” How fascinating. Therefore, essentially and for statistical purposes, a youth is a person between—but not limited to—the ages of 15 and 24 years.

At 15, I was running around in my school yard playing football with a paper ball; at 24, I was throwing countless paper balls into the trashcan because my engineering math assignment wouldn’t add up. Years later I am still, for all intents and purposes, a youth.



Beyond dictionary definitions, the word “youth” brings unique meanings for each individual. While some might accept it just as a rite of passage in life, another group may consider it exclusively a lifestyle. For some, like my sexagenarian father for example, it is a state of mind when tapping fingers on the table humming to a romantic song. “*Abhi toh main jawaan hoon*” (I am still young), he sings.

One cannot define youth simply with emotions and activities. It is fluid, like molten iron, brimming with endless potential and possibilities to give shape to an idea or create a personality.

At the very beginning, youth is a friend. When most of our days are spent in classrooms and tuitions, it shows up as a pleasant respite. One can find it in the giggle of a group of girls and in the brotherhood of a band of boys. It is the magic in the air when a young person feels invincible. When dreams are as free

as a bird and time is just a pair of moving sticks on a clock.

As days go by, youth becomes a partner. When we gain new experiences and a better perspective of life, we call upon it to fuel us. In taking responsibilities, in working hard to turn dreams into realities, and also in those dark moments when we feel like giving up, youth remains as a constant, to remind us that there is more to come. What looks like a stepping stone is actually a transition period—between who we were and who we want to be.

And in the later stages, youth is a guardian. When we find solid ground beneath our feet and trust ourselves to take on the world, we seek the lessons we learned from youth. Perhaps, we have become adults now, with our own families to take care of and careers to build, and with the power to dictate time. However, we always look back on the path that brought us to the present, with

gratitude.

Personally, as I look at the world today, I try to distinguish the youth by the following: *thinkers* and *doers*. I have always been a thinker in that categorisation; I was an introvert before I knew the meaning of the word. I took delight in observing and appreciating the doers. I still do. There is no competition between the two. Look around, you’ll find that there are individuals who are a mix of both. Maybe they are what we call “young leaders” or “changemakers”.

And the youth *does*. More so than ever before. Full of brilliant ideas, armed with true grit and blessed with the ability to touch people’s lives, the youth of today are no less than heroes. They show us, every day and around the world, that you don’t need a seat at the table to do good for the needy, that saving the environment starts with you and your personal practices, and that it’s more important to be a leader than a boss.

The world thinks so, too. The previous generations have paved the way (thank you!) for us to be here and the future looks up to us. Therefore, it is safe to say we are at a crossroads and whether we like it or not, this is our time. We don’t need to assemble like the Avengers but we need to stand beside one another; we need to stand up for what’s right and stand up against what’s wrong, even if we’re standing alone.

So today, take a stand. Remember, regardless of age, there is a “you” in youth—and youth is power.

Kazi Akib Bin Asad is the editor in-charge of SHOUT, *The Daily Star*. Email: akib.asad@thedailystar.net