

Complicity of certain law enforcement units in extrajudicial killings

Why are these units so trigger-happy?

THE murder of Major (retired) Sinha has brought to the fore the disturbingly high number of deaths due to “gunfights”, “shootouts”, and “crossfires” at the hands of the police in Teknaf upazila over the last two years. However, an investigation by the Daily Star has revealed that this is not the only law enforcement unit in the country that has an alarming record of extrajudicial deaths; nor is it just the police who are implicated in “gunfights”, “shootouts” or “crossfires.” Based on analysis of data over the last two years—since the “war on drugs” was initiated in May 2018—the investigation found that an overwhelming majority of extrajudicial deaths happen at the hands of three agencies: the police, Rapid Action Battalion, and Border Guard Bangladesh. Moreover, some units of these agencies were found to be particularly “trigger-happy,” recording a disproportionate number of deaths compared to their counterpart units.

For instance, of the 68 deaths due to so-called gunfights in Chattogram, Feni, Rangamati and Khagrachhari districts, 31 were by one unit alone, Rab-7, and most of the deaths took place in Banshkhal and Sitakunda. In Dhaka and surrounding areas, Rab-1 was responsible for 17 deaths due to “shootouts” in this two-year period, while Rab-2 was responsible for 18. The investigation also analysed the rhetoric or defence put forward by each unit following these deaths, and found that they used one particular narrative for almost all the cases under its jurisdiction and provided no specific details of the incidents or evidence of law enforcement officials being injured to journalists.

Despite repeated demands from different quarters nationally and internationally to end the impunity for extrajudicial deaths, including from the United Nations, the government has been consistent in its refusal to acknowledge the complicity of certain members of its law enforcement units in such deaths and take action against them. Our investigation clearly highlights how some units have been allowed to take the law into their own hands for far too long, and with complete impunity—in strict violation of the constitution. The stories offered by law enforcement as defence for these deaths are filled with so many holes and contradictions that our home ministry can no longer remain oblivious if it is to convince us of its commitment to upholding the rule of law, sanctity of the Bangladesh Constitution and basic principles of human rights. The ministry must initiate an in-depth and neutral investigation into each case of death at the hands of these “trigger-happy” units and take proper action to bring about systematic change in the way law enforcement approaches extrajudicial killings.

Newspaper industry requires urgent attention

Without govt intervention, newspapers may not survive the pandemic

THE ongoing coronavirus pandemic has led to a global economic slowdown that has affected multiple industries and led to mass unemployment and retrenchments across the world. In Bangladesh, at the beginning of the “general holiday” aimed at tackling the spread of coronavirus in the country, the government also announced measures to support industries that were facing great risks due to the pandemic-induced economic conditions. However, the newspaper industry, despite being severely impacted by the crisis and on the verge of collapse, has received very little attention from the authorities.

We fully support the recently released statement from the Newspaper Owners’ Association of Bangladesh (Noab), which urged the government to stand beside the newspaper industry during these trying times. Many newspapers across the country have been forced to discontinue print publishing and move online—even after employing multiple cost-cutting techniques, most newspapers are struggling to earn revenue and maintain regular payment of their employees, and some have had to make the difficult decision of reducing their workforce in the midst of a pandemic. Noab has held multiple meetings with different government ministries to represent the demands of newspaper owners, editors, journalists, agents and hawkers and ask for support; nevertheless, very few of their recommendations have been taken into account while preparing budget allocations and formulating policies during this crisis period.

During the pandemic, even when the economy came close to a standstill, journalists continued to do their jobs—going to great lengths and often putting themselves at risk to report from the field and provide the latest updates. News media has played an essential role in keeping the nation informed during these times of national emergency, but without government support, they will not be able to continue to provide these crucial services.

We urge the authorities to pay heed to the demands put forward by Noab, especially with regard to the reduction of taxes—as a service industry, newspapers are void of any special benefits and have to pay corporate tax of 35 percent, whereas despite being a for-profit sector, the RMG industry’s corporate tax stands at 10 to 12 percent. The Noab demands of reducing corporate tax to 10 percent, omitting the 15 percent VAT on the import of newsprint and reducing the Tax at Source on advertising revenue and advance tax on raw materials demand careful consideration. Almost every sector has been given incentives and concessions by the government to help them over during this period. The situation of newspapers and mass media is dire enough to warrant similar levels of support. Without government interventions, the industry may not survive the pandemic.

Poverty alleviation projects require stronger monitoring



NAWSHAD AHMED

GOVERNMENT projects targeting the poor, like any other projects, if not well planned and properly implemented, will not yield their desired outcomes. On July 28, the government slashed the allocation of two projects focusing on poverty reduction: “Income Support Programme for the Poorest Project” and “Amar Bari Amar Khamar Project”. The objectives of the first project was to benefit six lakh poorest pregnant women and lactating mothers and 27 lakh poor people across 43 Upazilas in four of the poorest districts which are Gaibandha, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari. The second project had a nation-wide coverage and was targeted to benefit 54.6 lakh poor people through agriculture-based income generation activities.

In case of both these projects, there have been some implementation issues that prompted the reduction of funding which will ultimately affect poverty alleviation efforts for the poor and vulnerable people in the country. The various weaknesses in project implementation and management in general such as frequent amendments, cost escalation, delays, time extensions, etc. the Planning Ministry seriously regretted during a high level meeting attended by all secretaries from all the

ministries and divisions, on August 13.

The state of poverty has deteriorated during the last four months due to the widespread economic woes resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic—after significant gains in poverty reduction were made over the last three decades. As per the Planning Commission, the percentage of the ultra-poor in total population has gone up from 10.5 percent to 20.5 percent as of June, 2020. In this situation, the

poor, alternatively called social safety net schemes, are funded through the revenue budget.

In Bangladesh, there is no central monitoring system for social safety net projects/programmes. The progress of implementation are monitored by the respective projects/programmes themselves. However, the monitoring arrangements and practices are not well established in these programmes.

A technical assistance project is currently being implemented by the government to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation capacity of the social security sector in the country.

Monitoring is an ongoing process that collects routine information to find out whether a project is making progress as per its planned objectives. Proper monitoring should continuously collect critical information, give status of project implementation, assess benefits derived by the target population, and measure the knowledge and skills acquired by the target people with project support.

Currently, monitoring of social safety net projects and programmes in Bangladesh is limited to tracking of activities implemented. Primarily, it covers progress achieved in terms of cash disbursement, food distribution, number of beneficiaries enrolled, training/meetings conducted, and awareness promotion materials produced. No programmes and projects have adequate tools to conduct in-depth monitoring. The monitoring process is not systematically used to assess the actual changes in status of the target families, identify weaknesses and undertake improvements in project implementation. There is no system to track desired results from these projects/programmes and find out whether the ultimate objectives of the interventions which are: improving the overall well-being of the target population, reduction of poverty, employment generation, technical capacity improvements, etc., have been achieved or not.

Most of the social safety net programmes do not have detailed logical framework and thus it is difficult to comprehend what specific results they are trying to achieve. These do not have adequate measurement standards and guidelines, i.e., performance indicators, data collection and use norms, baselines, quality control and reporting procedures.

For effective implementation, there is a need to monitor the programmes more systematically. Routine monitoring and data collection is a necessity in social security related projects and programmes since these are funded out of the revenue budget of the government and monitoring is weaker compared to the development projects and programmes. Systematic and routine monitoring are essential to assess the intervention quality, processes and measurement of performance of inputs, outputs and outcomes. In the absence of strong monitoring system, there will be some shocks, as in the case of the two poverty reduction projects, “Income Support Programme for the Poorest Project” and “Amar Bari Amar Khamar Project”, whose funding were cancelled.

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The state of poverty has deteriorated during the last four months due to the widespread economic woes resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

PHOTO: STAR

In general, the social safety net programmes and projects have weak monitoring capacity. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) adopted in 2015 has recognised the weakness in their monitoring capacity and recommended to build a strong results-based monitoring and evaluation system for the social safety net schemes.

government should make best possible efforts at implementation and monitoring of projects so that their impact on poverty reduction is truly felt.

Since a large-scale out migration of population from the cities to the rural areas has taken place during the last four months due to loss of employment and income, for the first time in decades, it is plausible that a significant pressure on poor families are being generated by the in-comers due to sharing of food with their family members. This is bringing down average food consumption which is affecting nutrition levels. Those who used to work in urban areas and sent money to their families living in the villages, have themselves become burdens upon their own families. This phenomena is forcing millions of families to slip back into the poverty bracket.

It is important to note that the two above projects whose budget has been curtailed, are funded from the government’s revenue budget. In fact, most of the projects/programmes for the

The Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) under the Ministry of Planning conducts monitoring activities of the development projects as per its mandate. In 1984, when the IMED was established from its parent organisation, Project Monitoring Division, established in 1977, it has been monitoring several hundred projects included in the Annual Development Programme every year.

However, IMED is not responsible for monitoring projects/programmes funded through the revenue budget of the government. Most of the social safety net programmes are funded from revenue budget and IMED is not monitoring them.

In general, the social safety net programmes and projects have weak monitoring capacity. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) adopted in 2015 has recognised the weakness in their monitoring capacity and recommended to build a strong results-based monitoring and evaluation system for the social safety

Regional economic programme vital for Afghan Peace

GUL MAQSOOD SABIT

ACHIEVING peace in Afghanistan is a strenuous and complex task due to the overlapping interests of many that have turned the country to the forefront for geopolitical rivalries.

The consensus of regional countries involved both directly and indirectly in the conflict is essential to achieving enduring peace. Anything less will only transfer the conflict to different parties resulting in the continuation of the war. While addressing the various conflicting views may be difficult if not impossible, the economic impact of Covid-19 has created a common ground for regional players to work together for direly needed economic recovery and growth. It may be time to transform the economic pressure into an opportunity for economic cooperation and regional integration that can have a boosting effect on the Afghan peace process.

The sudden spread of Covid-19 caught policymakers off-guard, making it difficult for some central and south Asian countries to develop a well-thought strategy for combating the backbreaking economic impact of the virus. These countries who were already experiencing economic and financial challenges further slipped to the verge of deep recessions. Pakistan’s rising public debt of 87.5 percent of GDP, inflation of 11.8 percent, a contracting economy with a projected growth of only 2 percent in 2021, a growing population whose 24.3 percent live under the poverty line and several other worsening economic indicators, reported by the World Bank, signifies the need for urgent action. Similarly, Iran who has been hit hard both by Covid-19 and US economic sanctions and India’s slowing economic growth and increasing demand for energy necessitates the need for growth-oriented policies and strategies. Energy-rich central Asian countries, whose economies have not grown much since their independence from the Soviet Union, are struggling to liberalise their commodity-based economies, develop soft infrastructure, connect, and begin expanding their economies.

It is beyond doubt that economic integration and enhanced connectivity of south and central Asia can result in propitious economic conditions and favourable opportunities for all countries of the region. Enhanced regional connectivity that has been weak or non-existent due to the long war in Afghanistan is essential for realising potential economic benefits. The current situation may be an opportunity to focus on connectivity and, thus, secure cooperation in peace effort through an

economic programme, supported by multilateral development agencies with investment contributions from the countries involved, that includes energy, transportation, and trade projects will result in regional integration, enhanced trade, and investment opportunities. A programme that includes transnational projects similar to CASA 100 that transfers energy from central Asia to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan will deflect the focus of the region from conflict to collaboration. Pressured by



A man waves an Afghan national flag during Independence Day celebrations in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 19, 2019. PHOTO: AFP

economic programme. The programme could connect Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan through large transnational projects. Afghanistan, due to its geographical location, can play a key role in such connectivity by providing safe routes for trade and other economic exchanges. This will induce cooperation in peace efforts in Afghanistan as the success of the programme will depend on stability there.

As Afghan peace effort progresses, a concurrent multinational regional

deteriorating economies and demand for action by its citizens, such a programme will compel regional players to cooperate who, otherwise, may oppose each other in Afghan matters. The programme could provide a framework for economic connectivity, fostering cross-nation cooperation that will not only have a positive impact on the peace process in Afghanistan but could be instrumental in sustaining it.

Besides, sustaining endured peace inside Afghanistan is not possible if the population, including Taliban fighters,

are not provided with a livelihood alternative. Taliban gained strength over the years, not because of their religious views but due to the availability of a large destitute and deprived pool of rural population, who did not benefit from the billions of dollars the world poured into the country. Living in meagre and lawless conditions with no alternatives to livelihood, many joined fighting groups to simply survive. According to the World Bank’s new projections, over 71 percent of Afghans will fall below the poverty line this year. Access to a proper justice system, schooling, and effective governance is either very limited or does not exist, creating a perfect recruiting pool of people for terrorist and government-opposed groups. US-Taliban peace agreement and a possible Afghan government and Taliban peace deal will only translate into long-term stability and sustained peace if Taliban fighters and the poverty-stricken population are provided with economic opportunities enabling them to earn a livelihood for their families. The regional economic programme could provide livelihood opportunities for Afghans once multinational projects are implemented.

The peace agreement between the Taliban, the US, and the Afghan government will not lead to stability in Afghanistan unless all regional countries and groups reach an understanding. The worsening economic conditions of the region due to Covid-19 and the growing need for recovery and economic growth may be an opportunity to attain consensus by converging the regional countries into an economic programme. A conducive multinational regional economic programme that focuses on economic integration and development, supported by multilateral development agencies will deviate attention from war to economic development in the region, having a fortifying effect on sustained peace in Afghanistan.

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