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FOUNDER EDITOR
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ACC full of sound and fury

But we need results!

WITH corruption entrenched in every artery and vein of society, the Anti-Corruption Commission keeps having to shift its focus from one sector to another and, as a result, investigations into major corruption scandals have slowed. At the start of the year, the ACC pledged to expose those responsible for the casino business and hold them to account. A few big names, including some ruling party lawmakers, had even surfaced during the early stages of the anti-casino drive. However, with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and investigations into irregularities in the health sector thereafter, the anti-casino drive has petered out.

While one can sympathise with the ACC when it comes to the amount of corruption cases that it has to deal with, it has to be noted that the ACC is at least partially responsible for this piling up of cases. Where was the ACC when corruption started to take root in all of these sectors and grew deeper and deeper? It is well-known throughout the world that once corruption establishes itself, it is extremely difficult to prevent it from metastasising, which is why it is most prudent to address corruption as early as possible. In Bangladesh, it is the exact opposite, as it seems the ACC is only allowed by government higher ups to investigate corruption once it becomes near intolerable to the masses—at which point the ACC prosecutes a few small fish to prevent the pitchforks from coming out.

But corruption cannot be addressed like this. Without cutting off the head from which it arises, corruption will continue to plague the nation. And herein lies the weakness of the ACC, that it is either reluctant or is fearful to prosecute members of influential and powerful quarters who are mainly at the root of corruption.

This must change if corruption is to be addressed and for the nation to prosper. If the government is really interested in curbing corruption, it has to empower the ACC and other concerned authorities to the point where they are no longer fearful to go after the masterminds behind all these corrupt initiatives. If need be, they must also be equipped with adequate manpower and whatever else is required. Otherwise, no matter how many cosmetic drives and investigations are conducted, corruption will continue to be the biggest impediment to Bangladesh's progress and its prosperity.

Banking sector vulnerable to cyber crimes

Why is the central bank's directive not being followed?

IT is worrying that almost five years after the USD 101 million cyber heist from the Bangladesh Bank's account with the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, most banks in the country still do not have an effective cyber security system. Reportedly, only four out of 60 banks in the country have set up cyber security operation centres in line with a Bangladesh Bank directive to prevent large-scale cyberattacks. After giving the directive in 2016, the central bank has also written to the banks from time to time asking them to put in place a cyber-security system, but to no avail.

While most banks seem uninterested in setting up such a system as they would need additional funds for the purpose, there are also many banks which cannot set up the system despite having the financial capability. The problem they are facing is the lack of a skilled manpower to do the job.

As more and more people are becoming dependent on online banking during this pandemic, our banking system is now even more vulnerable to cyber risks, according to experts. And the risks will increase further in the days ahead due to the rapid expansion of digital banking. Therefore, there is an immediate need to install such a system in all banks which would monitor and improve their security posture while preventing, detecting, analysing and responding to cyber-security incidents.

Since a lack of skilled manpower is one of the main reasons for many banks' failure to put the system in place, the government agencies should help create skilled manpower in the banking sector through their IT security units. As we know, the police and Rab have strong wings to tackle cyber-attacks, so they can also play a positive role in improving the skills of the IT officials in banks. The central bank should also fix a deadline for the banks for setting up the cyber security operation centres. Given what is at stake, this must be done immediately and followed through by the central bank.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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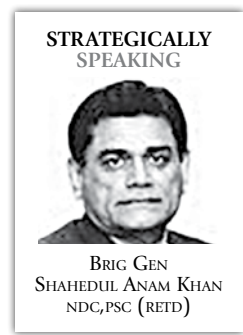
More female-friendly public toilets needed

Commuting has become essential for both men and women in their daily lives. But female travellers often face a lot of problems during their journey due to the dearth of female-friendly public toilets across our country. And most of the existing toilets are without locks, proper lighting and adequate water. There is no facility to manage menstruation hygienically. Female travellers need a safe toilet to change their feminine hygiene products and dispose them properly.

It is easier for men to urinate outside than it is for women. Female travellers often restrict their food and water consumption to delay the urge to use toilets which can trigger many physical complications. I hope the concerned authorities will take appropriate measures to establish more female-friendly toilets everywhere so that we can travel safely and our mobility remains unhindered.

Fawzia Khanum Ahona, by email

Why can't Iran have its own Samson Option?



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

IT is now officially known that Israel carried out the targeted killing of Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. According to a senior US administration official, Israel was behind the assassination (CNN, Kylie Atwood, December 2). It's a fair guess too that the US was privy to the act, since in the past, Israel had shared information about their covert killing missions with the US, although the latter would not admit it. Killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh by a remote-controlled weapon, as alleged by Iran, was among the many acts of Israeli aggression in violation of international laws and norms. He was also not the first Iranian scientist to have been assassinated—many before him fell victim to Israel's targeted killings too. They were targeted as part of Israel's plan to decapitate Iran's nuclear programme. Between 2010 and 2012, four Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated, while another was wounded in an attempted murder.

Given the Israeli article of faith—not to allow Iran or, for that matter, any Middle Eastern country to acquire nuclear capability, because that would pose an existential threat to Israel—its nuclear policy has received the endorsement of successive US governments since the Nixon administration. And its nuclear weaponisation programme has been helped by several western countries, France giving the lead.

The purpose of the latest killing may have been motivated by several factors. One of those could be to force a precipitate reaction from Iran which would then provide an excuse for Donald Trump to bomb the country, something he was raring to do since his defeat in the US presidential election became clear. But whatever may be the reason, the killing will likely harden Iran's position on the nuclear issue and compel it to hasten its nuclear programme. Whichever way Iran chooses to react, and the time of that, will wait until after the inauguration of the new US president, Joe Biden, on January 20, 2021.

The killing of Fakhrizadeh should fall in the category of acts of terror. Fakhrizadeh's is among the many targeted killings that have become a tool of war being justified as acts of self-defence. Several other countries have perfected this stock-in-trade art led by the US and Israel, the most brazen and blatant manifestation of which was the drone killing employed frequently by the Obama regime in Afghanistan, and the latest being the killing of the IRGC Commander Qasem Soleimani in January this year. But no one has the gumption to call these killings acts of terrorism, because these are being perpetrated by states with big and powerful armies. The question that one is forced to ask is, when is an act of terror not an act of terror? The answer is—when such acts are committed by the US or Israel. Recall how the EU reacted to the Russian poisoning of opposition leader and outspoken Putin critic Alexei Navalny by

slapping sanctions on six senior Russian officials to "combat the use of chemical weapons". Not a word expressed in this case. So much for principles!

Fakhrizadeh's "crime" was that he was leading Iran's nuclear programme. What, may I ask, would have been the international reaction—Israeli reaction in particular—if Ernest Bergmann, known as the father of the Israeli bomb, had been assassinated in the late 50s during the mid-stages of Israel's nuclear programme? From an apparently innocuous "atom

right of self-defence by any means, it won't accord others the same right. Iran is accused by the West—the US and Israel in particular—of supporting Hamas and the Islamic jihad in Palestine and of exporting arms to support conflicts in the Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Iraq. And to them, such an Iran possessing weapons of mass destruction would be a threat to international peace. These detractors would do us a world of good if they would draw up statistics to show the number of conflicts and resultant

in a way that an Iranian programme would not be, both because of Israel's roots in the Holocaust and because it fought a series of defensive wars against its neighbours. Israel has never given any reason to doubt its solely defensive nature. Israel has never brandished its capabilities to exert regional influence, cow its adversaries or threaten its neighbours." They forget that Israel is occupying Lebanese and Syrian lands illegally. As for browbeating and intimidating other countries, Israel



A protestor holds a picture of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's top nuclear scientist, during a demonstration against his killing in Tehran, Iran, on November 28, 2020.

PHOTO: MAJID ASGARIPOUR/WANA VIA REUTERS

for peace programme" commenced during the Eisenhower regime, Israel now has reportedly 90 nuclear warheads (400 by some accounts). There is no ambiguity regarding its nuclear weapons programme. All doubts were erased when Mordechai Vanunu spilled the beans to the media in 1986.

It is not only that Israel has a substantial stockpile of nuclear warheads in its arsenal, the country is also adding to it regularly—all for its security. According to a SIPRI report of June 2020, the number of nuclear warheads in Israel rose to 90, up from 80 in 2019. And these weapons are meant to deter Israeli enemies. And if a situation were to occur where Israel's survival was threatened, it would exercise its "Samson Option." The Israeli nuclear programme was initiated during the time of David Ben-Gurion. As Seymour Hersh says in his book "The Samson Option", Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders "were determined that no future enemy would be able to carry out another Holocaust. Just as Samson bought down the temple and killed himself along with his enemies, so would Israel destroy those who sought its destruction."

But while Israel arrogates to itself the

deaths and killings caused by the US policy of intervention, pre-emption and illegal wars since the end of the WWII, and how much population displacement those have caused. Iran can't be trusted with the bomb, but it was the US, the most "civilised" country in the world, that perpetrated the most uncivilised, heinous and inhuman act in recent history, dropping nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The US accuses Iran of being the greatest threat to world peace but international public opinion informs us otherwise. It is the US that is considered the greatest threat to world peace.

I must state a disclaimer here. I am a pacifist despite being a soldier (I believe there are none more pacifist than soldiers). I also believe that possessing nuclear weapons is immoral and indefensible, and all nuclear weapons must be done away with. But we have a hypocritical situation where Iran is undergoing rigid sanctions on "suspicions" only of attempting to acquire the bomb, while the Western world is happy to live with a nuclear Israel, asserting that "Israel's weapons are morally and historically defensible

doesn't have to do any of those things. The US is there to do it for them.

Like Israel felt after its forced inception, Iran is in danger too. It faces a hostile neighbourhood. A wedge has been driven through the Muslim world, exploiting the Shia-Sunni divide. Some Arab countries have established diplomatic ties with Israel; a few others may follow. This is to isolate Iran and force its submission. And it seems that some Indian scholars are selling the Israeli position in South Asia espousing the benefits of recognising Israel. While the US shamefacedly blames Iran for its alleged support of terrorism, it has no qualms to be in bed with its Arab allies that are alleged to be doing the same.

Every country, big and small, has the right to employ every means and measures it deems appropriate and adequate to defend itself. International compacts that perpetuate double standards must be rectified to become equitable documents. Iran has the right to defend itself—and it should have its own "Samson Option" to the extent of a credible deterrence.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Denial of access to family planning – another form of gender-based violence

CAROLINE CROSBIE and SHAMIMA PARVEEN

HISTORICALLY, around the world women's decision-making capacity regarding reproductive health choices had been limited by their husbands and society. Bangladesh has been a leader in family planning programming transforming women's access to essential services. Currently, over 52 percent of women have access to and use a modern contraceptive. However, more is needed to ensure all have access to these options.

There are currently 7.4 million women in Bangladesh who would like to use a family planning (FP) method, yet do not have access to them. Despite services being available, many women are unable to exercise their right to access them. The Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2015 conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics indicated that women do not enjoy equal participation as men in household decisions. Furthermore, inequality in household decision-making and finances affects women's ability to independently access family planning.

But even with access, women often face challenges in negotiating with their spouses regarding their FP method choices. Almost two-thirds (72.6 percent) of ever-married women experienced one or more forms of violence by their husbands at least once in their lifetime (VAW 2015, BBS). Shahina, a family welfare visitor



PHOTO: DECCANCHRONICLE.COM

from Sitakunda, Chattogram, has often addressed gender-based violence while providing family planning services. She remembers an incident when a husband brought his wife to the facility, who experienced a method failure and became pregnant. The husband openly scolded his wife for becoming pregnant in front of everyone and was about to beat her when Shahina had to intervene to stop him. Shahina was able to provide counselling to that couple which led to better understanding between them, and the husband supported his wife's maternal health care afterwards.

There is a correlation between women who experience gender-based violence and a decreased ability to negotiate using family planning methods, making them more vulnerable to unintended pregnancies. Furthermore, as mobility is restricted during this Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a spike in gender-based violence in Bangladesh requiring recognition of the impact that gender has on access to family planning and other health services. Greater collaboration among all social services is needed to address and eliminate violence.

New strategies are needed to increase men, boys, and other family members' positive engagement in reproductive health as well as innovative approaches to help health service providers overcome barriers to providing gender-responsive services and effectively address violence against women.

As we observe the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, we call upon all, including men and boys, to actively contribute to gender equality and to help eliminate gender-based violence. We applaud the government of Bangladesh's commitment to zero tolerance for gender-based violence. The United States Agency for International Development through its USAID Accelerating Universal Access to Family Planning Project, also known as Shukhi Jibon, is supporting the government of Bangladesh to address gender integration in reproductive health services to reduce the unmet need for contraception as well as to contribute to the elimination of gender-based violence.

We all can contribute to eliminating such violence, especially during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, by supporting women and girls in the decisions they make and help them to stay safe and free of violence.

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