

Focus

Chechnya: Never-ending Battle

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CHECHNYA has turned into a battle of will between two very unequal protagonists. On the one hand is Russia, the nuclear giant and the largest state in the world and on the other is diminutive Chechnya, locked in a battle with a handful of guerrillas, whom the Russians call bandits.

Russia fought a battle against the Chechens a little over two years ago. She had to beat a retreat under humiliating circumstances. The present war is a return bout by Russia to get even with the recalcitrant Chechens. Astonishingly, the Chechens, against all odds, are so far holding out.

The Chechen war has brought about the downfall of Boris Yeltsin. It is true that Yeltsin has not been in the best of health. He has had several bouts with pneumonia forcing him to go to his clinic repeatedly. Yet the time he selected for handing over the reins of power, 31 December 1999, he appeared in good health. Indeed he has very recently undertaken a strenuous trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Orthodox New Year which is nearly a week later than the Catholics and the Protestants.

By demonstratively showing his solidarity with his Christian Orthodox Church, Yeltsin is signalling that Russia will continue to play the Christian Orthodox card. Indeed during the war in the Balkans including the latest in Kosovo, Russia distanced herself from the Western intervention on strictly religious consideration.

In Chechnya, the soft underbelly of Russia, the consideration is of a different order. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the splintering of her empire, Russia has lived in mortal fear of further disintegration of her territory. The softest spot is in her south around the Caspian sea. There resides numerous ethnic groups of Turkish extraction and who profess Islam. The Chechen rebels are undoubtedly getting all kinds of support and assistance from their co-religionists.

In the current phase of the war, it appeared that the Chechens were on the run. The Russian tanks and artillery, strongly supported by air power appeared to be breaking Chechen resistance. Indeed Chechnya has a deserted look with buildings carrying large mark of heavy bombardment. The Chechen population, in a number have sought refuge in Ingushetia, inhabited by similar ethnic groups. The



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

capital of Chechnya, Grozny, has been mercilessly bombarded by Russian planes with the result that it is difficult to find a building standing. The Russian forces have been steadily advancing towards Grozny and time and again it has appeared that Russia would get the prize of Grozny any moment. Yet the handful of Chechen fighters appear to be holding on and inflicting heavy casualties on the Russians. Russia is unprepared to take human casualties. That is the reason that air action has been such an important factor in the Chechen war.

Former President Boris Yeltsin tried his Chechen war with several Prime Ministers. The Prime Ministers were sacked repeatedly. Yeltsin has been on the look out for a suitable successor. It appears that he has found his man in Vladimir Putin, the head of the intelligence outfit KGB, whom he named Prime Minister a few months ago and has very recently handed over powers of the Presidency. Thus 47-year-old Putin is expected to take his country to presidential elections within three months.

At the moment of taking charge of mighty Russia, the Chechen war appeared to be going the Russian way. The Russian forces were steadily advancing in the direction of Grozny and appeared to be carrying out a pinzer movement towards the capital. There was not a single murmur in Russia against the war. Indeed Putin appeared to bask in the public esteem. It was being confidently predicted that Putin would win the presidential race hands down. Indeed he appeared to benefit from approbation by the majority in the Duma, Russian parliament. The relations between President Boris Yeltsin and the Duma, during the nine years of his rule, have been acrimonious.

The picture in Russia can radically change if the Chechen war starts going badly for Russia. In other words the Russian public is not ready to watch on their TV body bags bringing back young Russian dead soldiers. Such a situation would bring about profound change in the Russian public opinion.

Among the leaders the one who appears poised to challenge Vladimir Putin for the Presidential race is Gennady Zhuyganov, leader of the Communist party in the Duma. He has maintained an image of a strong leader and is not tainted by corruption. He is the leader of the Communist party, discredited a decade ago at the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

I recall my visit to the Soviet Union shortly after the collapse and the emergence of nearly a dozen independent states and mainly Turkic states. At that time abuse was heaped on the Communist party, which was accused of being the cause of all kinds of ills plaguing the Soviet Union. The Communist party in the Soviet Union and throughout the world had a near unceremonious exit except the one in neighbouring West Bengal.

Over the last one decade we have witnessed the reemergence of the Communist parties in several states in Eastern Europe and the birthplace of systematic revolt against the Communist party — in Gdansk in Poland. In other words what is evident is that after the shock of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the Communist parties, all these countries started groping for an alternative. In many cases they have returned to their original Communist parties. I recall that during my travel in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, the Governments had barely had time to pull down the large Communist party signboards from their official buildings.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the Communist party, the Russian population continues to grope for a way out. The Challenge of the Communist party in Russia in the forthcoming presidential elections needs to be taken seriously. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has embraced the road to western liberalism including its liberal economy. The return of the Communist party to power in Moscow through the ballot would send the most profound shockwaves throughout that vast country and certainly to her immediate neighbours, now held together by Moscow through the Commonwealth of Independent States. Giant Russia appears to hide in her bosom surprises for humanity.



A soldier of Russian special forces takes aim and fires a heavy sniper gun during an operation in the mountainous Vedeno region on Tuesday 11 January. — AFP Photo

Two Events and Some Outrage

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Elian Gonzalez has already suffered the pain of losing his mother. He shouldn't have to undergo any more. He deserves a normal life, back home in Cuba, with his father.



Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Choudhury

NOW that the obsessive reporting on Y2K bug and millennium celebration have died down, two new disturbing reports have attracted headlines worldwide. The first one involves the news of atrocities committed by the Russian soldiers in Chechnya; while the second one exposes a shameful exploitation of a little boy in the US for political purposes.

First, let's look at the news coming out from Chechnya. In addition to the haphazard mayhem the Russians are perpetrating in Chechnya, there is shocking new evidence that Russian soldiers are also guilty of at least one atrocity that was anything but indiscriminate. In fact, it seems to have been a slaughter that was as methodical as it was appalling.

A wealthy Chechen businessman has emerged from the smoke and misery of the war with a videotape notable for its clarity and power. The tape he shot portrays survivor accounts of a rampage that took place over a two-week period in early December in a Chechen village named Alkan-Yurt, after Russian troops managed to capture it from rebels.

The tape supports allegations by Human Rights Watch that, during the rampage,

Russian soldiers, murdered at least seventeen villagers, tortured and terrorised others, burned and raided their homes and forcibly took various household items.

Fragments of the dramatic videotape have been broadcast on Russian television, and reports of the atrocity in Alkan-Yurt stirred up a political storm in Moscow. Apparently, some of the same Muscovites who in the past have vigorously cheered the Russian army's rampage in Chechnya now seem appalled by it. Even high-ranking Russian government officials expressed their surprise and dismay in what they saw and had promised a thorough investigation by the government.

Their promise may have been sincere, but it is unlikely to be carried out. The Kremlin has repeatedly proved that it doesn't give a rap about either Chechens or human rights, and to suppose it will punish soldiers guilty of tormenting Chechens is almost certainly wishful thinking.

If the Kremlin fails to identify and punish those responsible for war crimes in Chechnya, then it will have no legitimate grounds to object to an inquiry by others. Unfortunately, Russia would not doubt veto any move by the United Nations to expand the mandate of the UN tribunal now investigating war crimes in Bosnia, Chechnya and Rwanda.

Thus it is unlikely that justice will be meted out to those involved in the war crimes of Alkan-Yurt. That itself will only compound the injustice and provide another dimension to the atrocity that occurred there.

Now, let's consider the events in the US.

Ordinarily, a six-year old boy whose mother had died would be raised by his father. But the case involving six-year old Elian Gonzalez is anything but ordinary. He was rescued in

late November while clinging to an inner-tube in the waters off the coast of Florida after fleeing Cuba with his mother and others in a boat that had overturned. His mother was among those who died in the accident, and the boy himself has been living with relatives in Miami. His father, who lives in Cuba, wants him home, naturally.

Last week, the US Immigration and Naturalisation Service declared that the boy would be returned to his father in Cuba within two weeks. Both Fidel Castro and his enemies in the US have sought to exploit the young boy for political advantage. But since last week's ruling by the Immigration Service, most of the posturing has been undertaken by the anti-Castro forces. They do not want the boy to be returned to his father in Cuba, chiefly because of actions by these anti-Castro Cuban expatriates in the US and opportunistic politicians, the welfare of the boy has taken a back seat.

There is no evidence that the

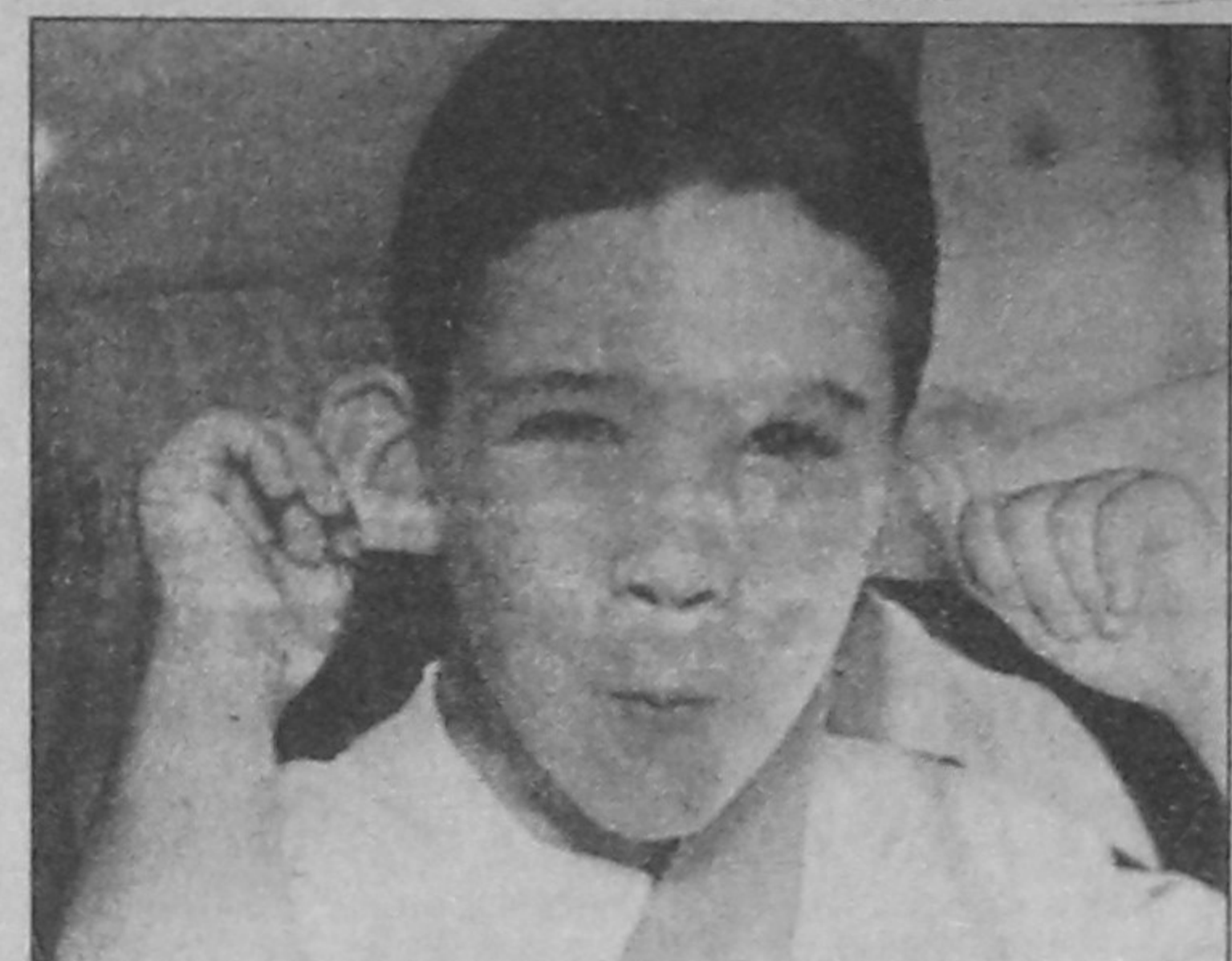
father in Cuba has been neglectful or abusive. The boy's family photos and medical and school records in Cuba, which has since been published in newspapers, show the father's involvement in Elian's life.

Those who want the boy to stay in the US discount the father's statements, pointing out that he lives in a country where freedom of expression is suppressed. Are they suggesting that, in spite of his repeated pleas, Elian's father really doesn't want his son back?

Republican Congressman Dan Burton, chairman of a powerful committee in the Congress, was guilty of a particularly outrageous form of exploitation last week when he sought to delay the boy's return to Cuba by issuing him a subpoena to testify before Congress in early February.

Each day that passes tightens the bonds between Elian and those who care for him in the US. Each day makes it more painful for him to return to his own country and to his father. Elian Gonzalez has already suffered the pain of losing his mother. He shouldn't have to undergo any more. He deserves a normal life, back home in Cuba, with his father.

These two isolated events go on to show how the super powers ignore the rights of innocent individuals to further their own narrow interests.



Elian Gonzalez makes faces at the photographer on his way to school on Tuesday 11 January in Miami. A state judge ruled Monday that Elian would remain in the custody of his great uncle Lazaro Gonzalez until a hearing in March and until then the six-year-old will continue to go to school and be the center of attention wherever he goes in the Miami area. — AFP Photo

Reasons for Traffic Jam: An Observation

by AKM Ahsan Ullah



TRAFFIC jam is not a new phenomenon in Dhaka city — only getting acute of late. It has become a common scene in different parts of the city ever since migrations started from the rural areas. With the increase in number of migrants, the city experienced a huge rush of rickshaws and also motorized vehicles resulting in unexpected jam on the city roads.

Dhaka city's population growth rate was the fastest during the period 1961-74 when the then East Pakistan then Bangladesh experienced several disasters (Siddiqui, 1996). In recent years, the growth of Dhaka city has been the consequence of net migration beside other factors. The city could not cope with the influx of migrants from the rural areas as job opportunities and physical infrastructure did not grow in proportion. Most of the city-dwellers are from the lower middle income group and rickshaw is the most popular mode of transportation with them. People from the rural areas can at least expect to be gainfully employed by pulling rickshaws in the city, which they could rarely think of in their villages. In 1988, there were 220,000 rickshawpullers in Dhaka city for against 88,000 rickshaws (licensed and unlicensed) owned by 40,000 people (Islam, 1988). However, the present and exact number is not available.

There are a lot of reasons for traffic jam in Dhaka city, such as plying unusable and unfit transports, unskilled drivers, bad and narrow roads, inappropriate traffic system, and lack of proper training on traffic system, lack of awareness etc. Another important reason is that manually driven transports run alongside the high-power engine driven ones on all roads with a few exceptions. The number of traffic police is too small to control such a mixed traffic. Millions of man-hours are wasted due to traffic jam on the way.

The old part of the city, Maghbazar turn, Malibagh and Mouchak turn, Jatrabari area, Mirpur Road, Mirpur area, New Market area, Tejgaon turn, Gabtoli bus stand, Gullistan, Mohakhali and Hatirpool are known to be the most congested areas. In Dhaka city, roads are not wide enough and the existing number of roads is not adequate either. Inadequacy of bus services has encouraged proliferation of rickshaws which is the main reason for traffic jam.

It is found that if one bus of 80-seat capacity was introduced in the city, the need for more than 30 smoke-spewing autorickshaws would diminish. Hence, environment pollution would be reduced. If another bus of the same capacity is introduced, the need for 50 rickshaws would diminish. Most rickshaws ply on the roads without legal documents.

In this observation, the cases of jam in narrow alleys have not been included. Magh Bazar, Malibagh, Bangla Motor, Jatrabari, New Market, Gullistan turns, and Mirpur circle ten, Saidabad area, Tejgaon turn were visited from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Twenty-three cases of

Observed reasons	No. of cases	%
Police halted bus/truck on the way	4	17
Quarrelling on the way leaving the path blocked behind (passengers-passengers, rickshawpullers-richshawpullers, passersby-passersby, passersby-drivers)	4	17
Absence/ineffectiveness of traffic police	3	12
Left side of the road that should have been kept free for the vehicles to make a left turn were illegally occupied by vehicles going straight	3	12
Hawkers blocking the roadside	2	10
Whimsically some truck/bus drivers blocked the way	2	10
Barriers at railroad crossings	2	10
Competitions among the rickshawpullers resulting in collusion with each other	1	4
Accidents	1	4
Pushcarts blocking the road	1	4
Total	23	100

jam were observed. When a long queue of rickshaws and automobiles was observed we immediately made our way to the front of the queue and tried to find the reasons for the jam.

With a few exceptions, signal lights were found to play a very insignificant role in directing vehicles due to police ineffectiveness and drivers' disregard for traffic regulations. Different reasons were observed from one jam area to another. Among them, obstruction of vehicles on the road during peak hours by policemen and altercations between drivers on the way were the highest (17 per

cent), while absence and ineffectiveness of the police accounted for 12 per cent of the causes of jams.

Police were found ineffective when jams started. They, in most cases, allegedly and apparently remain busy in collecting tolls from heavily loaded trucks and other contractions.

Traffic jam on Tejgaon Sat Rasta Mo is caused due to structural reasons. There is a roundabout where seven roads meet. However, the islands on the roads have been built unnecessarily big occupying a

large space of the busy roads. Trucks and containers are kept on the roads in such a way that these roads have virtually become depots for these vehicles. Bus drivers going to the airport, Gazipur and Joydevpur stop just on the turn to pick up passengers.

Reasons for traffic jam on the Mouchak turn is different from that of Tejgaon. Vehicles waiting in queue on Malibagh road go to Rampura or Biswa Road block the entire roadway behind. Narrowness of the road seems to be the main cause of traffic jam in this area. Most often traffic police do not follow

the signal light to direct vehicles. They are found puzzled. Besides government departments, the NGOs can also play a very important role in reducing the traffic jam that has been paralyzing the city life. They can approach the donors for seeking financial assistance in this regard. The government in collaboration with the NGOs might take the following steps as an initiative to eliminate traffic jam from the capital city.

They can make some important and busy roads rickshaw free, and adequate bus service could be introduced there.

They can arrange short course training programme for the traffic police on regular basis and recruit more traffic police. Expert consultants can be hired from abroad for a limited period for proper guidelines.

NGOs can arrange short course training programme on traffic system for all kinds of drivers in phases. A compensation package should be arranged for the time taken from them for participating in the course.

Leaflet containing the traffic system, traffic law, and punishment for law-breakers can be distributed widely.

They can persuade the suffering public who may help build public opinion in favour of widening the roads.

They can build flyovers. Even the NGOs can themselves take the initiative to build fly-over in some particular turns. The cost can be recovered through collecting tolls from the users.

Link roads can be made to divert traffic.

Campaign against rickshaw pulling to make them understand that rickshaw pulling destroys one's vital power and hinders death and for other viable occupation made available.

Although it might sound impractical but not impossible to fix surveillance camera for proper monitoring of the traffic system, and take exemplary measures to tighten the traffic system on important roads. These cameras cover few miles on straight roads.

They can build some dividers that can facilitate the vehicle to turn to left. This side is supposed to be kept always clear for the vehicle to take the turn.

With rise in living standard the number of vehicles will normally increase, but this increase should commensurate with the road space available. To reduce intolerable traffic jam in Dhaka city some recommendations have been made on the basis of observations:

- Check illegal rickshaws and motor cars
- Oblige/compel untrained and novice drivers to refrain from plying on the roads.
- Check delivery of illegal driving licenses and fitness certificates.
- Check establishment of garment factories in the city heart and decentralize them in the peripheries
- Check vehicles to stop on busy turns for lifting passengers.
- Check illegal occupation of road space by rickshaws, trucks, hawkers and roadside shopkeepers.
- Repair roads as and when required, not keep it pending for even a week.
- Increase level of awareness about traffic law among the drivers as well as the common people, and
- Check traffic police and others concerned from being bribed by drivers.

In conclusion, one has to say that for a long-term effective solution of the menacing traffic problem, the rural-urban migration must be checked. The authorities must ponder over and find some viable alternatives for the migrants without losing much time.

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