

Illegal arms in Chittagong

Time to mop them up

ALARM bells must ring loud and clear about the vulnerability of Chittagong to violence, especially as parliamentary elections draw nearer. *The Daily Star's* seven-part investigative report on illegal arms and politically patronised 'terrorist' groups in that city has provided clear proof, with identification of names, places and events, that there are approximately 200 active mercenaries, arranged in some 16 groups, with backing from the Awami League, the BNP, the Jamaat and the defunct NDFP, all poised to unleash their muscle power in the forthcoming polls. To our knowledge, such detailed information has not been made available publicly before. The question now is, will the authorities make use of this exposé?

As our report has disclosed, the mercenaries are armed with a range of modern weapons and do not hesitate to use them to carry out murders, intimidate police and civil society. They have ample financial resources from ownership of property, extortion and collection of toll and by direct subsidies from vested parties. Their links with the underworld of smuggling are also strong.

Among the political masters under whose direction these groups carry out their nefarious deeds, the Awami League's links are blatant. But the BNP, Jamaat and local leaders also patronise their own armed gangs. All parties have recently intensified efforts to arm their respective groups before the caretaker government takes office. Two major armed groups even got together recently at a 'convention' to forge an alliance for an influential BNP lawmaker.

Given its proximity to Myanmar and India, there is scope for various groups to engage in arms smuggling in order to supply not only Chittagong, but also other parts of the country. In our report, we have identified other groups in the country who, with political backing, have been buying arms in the Chittagong marketplace, to 'prepare' for the polls.

It would be an understatement to say that Chittagong is a potential flash-point for violence. The rise of armed gangs is undermining this once lively and thriving trading centre, its unofficial commercial capital and boasting of the only port in this country. The illegal arms trade has country-wide repercussions. Cleaning up Chittagong is therefore not only a significant local issue, but a national dilemma that must be addressed as soon as possible.

Lethal lubricating oil

Ban makes little sense, if not enforced

LET'S have a recap. Dhaka's air is the most polluted in the world, with dangerous levels of lead, benzene and toluene contents. Some 65,000 two-stroke three-wheelers (auto-rickshaws and tempos) have long been identified as the major source of air-pollutants. These vehicles burn crude lubricating oil and petrol together, spewing black smoke into the air. The government takes a three-dimensional measure to prevent air pollution. It bans import of leaded petrol; prohibits production, blending, import and marketing of lubricating oil without proper additives; and decides to phase out two-stroke engines by January 1, 2003.

Now, let's take a closer look at the progress so far made in the fight against air pollution. Import and sale of leaded petrol has more or less stopped. However, the two-stroke auto-rickshaws are going strong. Let alone phasing out, two-stroke engines and their spare parts are regularly smuggled in from India. The government has made no attempt to encourage switch to four-stroke three-wheelers. Import duty on these vehicles remains extremely high. And, as for the ban on lubricating oil without proper additives, it has made little or no impact at all. Sale of crude and recycled lubricating oil continues unabated. Even the registered filling stations sell it from unsealed containers.

When such is the scenario, we wonder what is the point of the ban and other restrictive measures. People hardly abide by environment-related laws and regulations. The reason, as we see it, is twofold. First, the government itself gives the impression that environment is a matter of secondary significance. And the second, the state agencies are either ill-equipped for or indifferent to enforcement of bans and other prohibitive measures. Another major drawback is absence of sensitisation campaigns. For example, many an auto-rickshaw driver still does not know that combustion of lubricating oil and petrol is detrimental not only to the environment but also to the engine.

The bottom-line is: degradation of air quality cannot be stopped or prevented only through formulation of law and imposition of bans. The government might as well stop ordering bans if it fails to enforce them.

Calls for poverty reduction: Is anybody listening?



DR. A. R. CHOUDHURY

bers coming from sub-Saharan Africa. Almost half of the total population in these countries around 300 million people survive on less than a US dollar a day.

In 1990, at the second UN conference in Paris, the plight of the least developed countries was the subject of an ambitious programme of action. Promises were made on three specific issues: trade, aid, and debt. The developed countries had pledged to help the world's poor. But few countries, if any, have translated

Bangladesh receives from the United States, it loses eight dollars in trade restrictions on textile imports. This translates into lower wages and reduced employment opportunities for the garment factory workers in this country.

While it is true that average tariffs have decreased over the years, they are exceptionally high in labour-intensive sectors, such as, agriculture, textiles, where the LDCs may have a comparative advantage.

When it comes to aid and debt

the conference, the only pledges on aid came mostly from the Scandinavian countries. Interestingly, these are the only countries who have already met their pledged target.

For the LDCs, the burden of foreign debt represents an intolerable hindrance to social and economic development. These countries have to allocate a considerable share of their national income for debt servicing, thereby reducing expenditures on social services, education, and health. Studies have

A look at the composition of the conference would tell the entire story. While the forty-nine LDCs had sent high-level representatives to the meeting, in many cases national leaders, such as, Sheikh Hasina, the list of attendees from the developed countries was significantly less impressive. The United States, for example, was represented by the head of the USAID, who has very little policy-making authority. This, by itself, shows the priority that the developed countries are giving to

recent studies done by UNCTAD suggest that the EBA will have little impact on the trade sector in the least developed countries as most of their goods already enter the EU duty- and quota-free. The problem that needs to be addressed is how this EBA approach can be extended to the US, Canada, and Japan, which have much higher barriers to LDC trade. This conference has done nothing in addressing this issue.

As was the case with the two previous UN conferences on the least developed countries, the latest UN conference in Brussels started with its stated aim to break the cycle of misery and poverty among the world's poor. But the week-long meeting was filled with rhetoric and ambitious goals rather than concrete action plans from the developed countries. These countries have been pledging for a long time to help the world's poor. But their actions do not match their rhetoric. What is needed now is not more promises but real action; what is at stake is the lives of millions of people and the credibility of the global economic system.

The fact that the conference ended with a final declaration and adopted a draft programme of action for the next decade is nothing new or encouraging. It is more ritualistic than substantive.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

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these issues.

Those who are suggesting that the conference have been successful in highlighting a number of initiatives refer to the European Union's "everything but arms" (EBA) plan announced earlier this year which provides free access to LDC imports and also the OECD decision to untie most development aid to these countries. However, a number of

repeatedly shown that such misallocation of resources have led to uncontrolled migration flows and distortions in, among others, agricultural production decisions, with adverse effects on the rural economies in these countries. Added to this, LDCs are more often than not, forced to liberalise their markets at breakneck speed, leading to disastrous consequences.

OPINION

A columnist's partisan view

DR. S.A. MALEK

M R. Rezaul Karim an important member of the think-tank of BNP and an ex-diplomat has probably taken up the responsibility of tarnishing the image of Sheikh Hasina's government at a time when the next general election is knocking at the door. Mr. Karim, a member of the foreign service with vast experience in his own field served the foreign office for nearly two and a half decades. His experience at home and particularly in politics seems to be inadequate though.

The way he has been using his pen as a sword against the Awami League and the manner in which he has been dealing with certain subjects is bound to convince one that he has, of late, forgotten about his position and put himself as a promoter of BNP.

Mr Karim has tried in all possible ways to prove in his article on the Awami League in *The Daily Star* on May 19 that the ruling party is out to influence the result of the next general election to be held in October, 2001, under the caretaker government.

The first point that he mentioned was the appointment of the Election Commission (EC) and other office bearers of the commission who, in his opinion, belonged to the ruling party. By appointing them the ruling party has obviously tried to put its own people in the EC.

In fact, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is also a member of the erstwhile CSP as Mr. Saifur Rahman is. Mr. M.A. Sayed also served different governments at different times. If there is no problem to allow Mr. Sayed as CEC, why should there be difficulty about Mr. Saifur Rahman as EC who has also served different governments at different times. Mr. Saifur Rahman worked as Additional Secretary when Begum Zia was the Prime

Minister and Home Secretary under Sheikh Hasina. Did he serve as Sheikh Hasina's man when he was the Additional Secretary (Home) during Begum Zia's tenure?

The question of being a relative of Sheikh Hasina has been raised about the secretary who has been appointed by the present government. If the kind of relationship that Mr. Moazzem has with Sheikh Hasina is a hindrance to appointment then it will be difficult to get people for any post in Bangladesh. The question should be whether he is competent for the job or not. Even in the White House, the pro-establishment persons are chosen for appointment when there is a change in government. If Mr. Moazzem has not been found unfit to do his job in other positions then why should he not be accepted in his position?

The second point he dealt with was the transfer of government officials. According to Mr. Karim, all these have been done to serve the purpose of the ruling party. The question is whether the government has engaged any person from outside the administration or if there has been any violation of norms as practised in case of transfer and retirement of government officials.

The government that enjoys the right of governing the country has every right to appoint, transfer and post people anywhere. The only question that can be asked is if there has been any violation of the existing rules. His observation about the Public Service Commission (PSC) is regrettably. The present commission has been discharging its duties to the full satisfaction of the nation.

The last point that Mr. Karim brought against the ruling party was the disintegration of the opposition. In fact, he has blamed the government for departure of Ershad from the 4-party alliance. People of this country know about the unpredictability of General Ershad's nature. Nobody knows where this gentleman would stand. When, of course, as an individual, Mr. Ershad has got every right to decide his own position. Mr. Karim should know who are

utmost caution and high degree of integrity. Mr. Karim should compare the previous position with the present one.

The third point that Mr. Karim took up for criticism was the allocation of development funds alleging that the ruling party has made it the last weapon of its development activity. Mr. Karim has a lot of allegations about the allocation of wheat, rice and cash. He should remember that the ruling party has done no wrong by allocating the last part of its development budget meant for the development of the people. If the government enhanced and expedited the development effort through the elected members of parliament what mischief has been done to the people? It was the honourable members of parliament who are really entrusted with the responsibility of development. The government certainly would like to increase its popularity during the election years. The elected members of the opposition have not cooperated with the government. Naturally, the ruling party members got the preference. How can the opposition party members expect that they would not stay in parliament but would enjoy the benefits of governance?

Development of the country is the commitment of the government of Sheikh Hasina. She has performed this task better than the previous government. This government will do everything possible to carry on the strides of development.

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the people who frequently changed their position in politics and why. This is a culture introduced by the autocrats and their associates. Sheikh Hasina and her great father never practised this politics.

As for black money and armed terrorists, the version of Mr. Karim was painfully one-sided. He blamed only the ruling party. The four and a half years' terrorism on the street perpetrated by the BNP and its allies failed to attract his notice. He is blind to regular brutal murder of the ruling party members, he only finds terrorists in the AL.

Intellectuals commit no crime when they take side with political views or parties. But the problem arises when they become blind. It is not wrong that Mr. Karim supports Begum Zia and her BNP. Because of that support, however, he should not forget to call a spade a spade.

A member of the erstwhile foreign service Mr. Karim cannot be

ignored, especially when he is an advisor to Begum Zia. He can advise anything to Begum Zia, but he cannot ill-advice the nation. The message that he has been trying to

to give the people about the Awami League and its leader Sheikh Hasina should be based on facts rather than fiction. To write in favour of a person or a party is not bad, but to do the same by presenting only one side of an issue, or by distorting facts is certainly condemnable.

The writer is the political advisor to the Prime Minister.

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



Road islands or ruins?

All the road islands from Paltan to Bijoy Nagar area, are in ruins. The grilled fencing is missing and the islands themselves are decrepit dumps, used for dumping garbage and waste. These so called road dividers deface the city and are dangerous to negotiate for passers by. When will the authorities wake up from their slumber and restore some basic order and cleanliness to the road islands?

STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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LDC meeting

Prime minister Sheikh Hasina's recent presentation at the LDC-111 conference where she tabled a four-point proposal seeking debt waiver, increased aid from the rich nations, market access, and removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to LDC products, raises some interesting questions especially in the light of Sheikh Hasina's comments concerning partnership between the underdeveloped countries and their development partners and her attaching importance to a functioning and transparent democracy, promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, ensuring gender equality and the rule of law.

It seems Bangladesh has already received extensive aid and development funding as have many other LDCs. But still we haven't moved from LDC status. We go to donor meetings always seeking more aid and investment. If someone offers us less aid, we feel offended and insulted. But what are we doing with this aid? What are we doing as a country to move from our LDC status?

We have tremendous natural gas resources. Why haven't we exploited this resource and moved to a higher standard of living? There is a huge market of Bangladeshi products in India. But we are not

utilising it. Should we wait while India makes arrangements with central Asian countries or Iran or Burma?

When are we going to stop talking about Sonar Bangla with our begging cups out and our increasing demands? What are we doing to help ourselves and improve our state?

M. M. Haque

Gulshan, Dhaka, on e-mail

Hooked on The Star

I have to admit that *The Daily Star* has got me hooked with its interesting news and views. I used to read news from other sources, but *The Daily Star* has changed it all. The first thing I do after I come home from work, is click on to its website and go through the daily. This newspaper has been playing a vital role in keeping us informed about different issues.

I would like to congratulate its reporters for their hard work and dedication. I hope *The Daily Star* will keep up the good work and try harder to provide unbiased news.

A Reader on e-mail

(Name and address withheld at writer's request)

Foreign investment

I established a manufacturing factory at CEPZ as a joint venture

company with 20 per cent local and 80 per cent foreign investment. But the local minority shareholders fraudulently and illegally transferred all the 80 per cent foreign shareholding in their names, throwing the foreign investors completely out of the company, denying them all their investment and benefits.

With such attitude of the locals towards foreign investors, how can anyone expect increase in foreign investment?

MAHAMD

USA, on e-mail

Mystery disease

An unknown disease has attacked the southern district of Meherpur and has already taken 12 lives with 100 more affected. Some doctors claim it to be Japanese Encephalitis but no one is certain what has claimed so many lives.

It is suspected to be an infection carried by livestock such as cows and spread by mosquitoes. If this is the case, why is the chairman of the affected area or the MP of that constituency not taking any steps to prevent it?

This disease can only be identified when the blood samples of the affected are tested in IEDCR in Dhaka. Our health ministry should take steps to establish similar institutions at the district level or at

least divisional head quarters to handle such calamities.

Md Sarmam Hossain

Madpur, Dhaka

Party influence

The recent meeting of the Election Commission with the law enforcing and the intelligence agencies reflects the real law and order situation in the country. According to newspaper reports, these agencies informed the EC that the situation will get better when the caretaker government takes over.

This has only one meaning and that is, these agencies are crippled by the ruling political party. These law enforcing agencies cannot work neutrally due to political influence. I am not trying to single out the present government. The situation was the same during all regimes.

If the ruling political party imposes undue pressure on these agencies they lose their moral strength in controlling crime and maintaining discipline. They also start taking advantage and indulge themselves in crime, instead of preventing crime from taking place.

Police are considered the shoulder for general people to lean on whenever they feel unsafe. But in our country people are afraid to go to police, fearing that it won't ease

their sufferings, rather cost them money and increase their hardship. I do hope newspaper report will be a wake-up call for the relevant authorities.

Md Kamrul Hassan