

## Danger on the highway

Time for the government to act

HERE can be no dispute that reckless driving on the nation's highways coupled with overloading of commercial vehicles has been responsible for an enormous loss of life and property. According to one reliable estimate, 2500 people were killed and thousands more injured in road accidents last year. However, there is no similar appraisal as to who is to blame for this sorry state of affairs, with each side in the debate pointing fingers at the other.

The traffic police authorities complain that they are powerless to prevent reckless driving and the dangerous overloading of commercial vehicles as these belong to or are controlled by influential politicians, officials and businessmen. Then there is the transport employees' trade unionism coming into play. They claim that no sooner do they act to detain offenders than they are ordered by their superiors to let them go.

Indeed, so bold the drivers have become, the police claim, that they routinely refuse to stop when ordered to do so and even go so far as to try to run over traffic sergeants attempting to apprehend them.

The problem is further compounded by extreme scarcity of resources and personnel and the fact that Bangladesh Road Transport Authority officials cannot act independently of the deputy commissioners in any locality.

For their part, the drivers and owners of commercial vehicles argue that the police are guilty of widespread extortion and they are forced to overload their vehicles to meet the cost of this extortion.

There is doubtless a fair amount of truth to both sides. It is true that political patronage is often an obstacle to policing, and by the same token, it is also true that police extortion and toll collection are serious problems.

It is now the responsibility of the government to step in and find a way out of the morass. The difficulties enumerated by either side appear to be easily resolvable with a determined effort on the part of the government. What is needed is for the government to focus its attention on this matter and ensure enforcement of the law so that death and destruction that afflict our highways can be curtailed.

## Freed hotel owner

He is well, law and order isn't

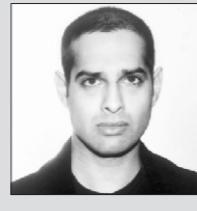
THE release of resort hotel owner Hasan Mahbub Bablu kidnapped three weeks ago in Bandarban has given us a sigh of relief, particularly to the members of his family. It has once again brought into focus the helplessness of businessmen being targeted by extortions and abductions at will.

That the hotelier did not face the same fate as some other businessmen did in the recent past, is good augury. The district administration has claimed that the release was the result of the kidnappers being cordoned by the joint forces in deep forests. However, it has also been reported that he was freed after the family paid a ransom of Tk 15 lakh in two installments. If the latter version of the story is true, then it was not really an unqualified triumph on the part of law enforcers, even though the army noose tightening around them and their constant calls for surrender must have made a difference. Overall, a question mark dangles over law enforcement in terms of preventing or dealing with the latest wave of abduction.

Businessmen have already paid a heavy price, thanks to the activities of organised groups of kidnappers operating from remote places in the hilly region. The law enforcers' response to the recent spate of abduction has been inadequate, though some of the abducted men were released.

Obviously, better monitoring and surveillance is needed to deal with such crimes. A marked improvement in police mobility and intelligence service is also required to break the back of the crime syndicates.

The hotelier has been set free, but nothing has happened that may work as a deterrent to repetition of such crimes in future. The point is that the joint forces could not arrest any member of the group. The law enforcers will have to rescue the victims and at the same time crush the network of criminals. The police administration should think seriously in terms of capacity building to pre-empt and handle abduction cases.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

HOME Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury has lost the moral authority to continue as the home minister.

How he has escaped censure and dismissal for the dismal state of law enforcement in the country under his stewardship remains one of the great mysteries of Bangladeshi politics. But now he has taken to compounding his own incompetence and inadequacy by uttering bare-faced falsehoods in the JS that bring disrepute to the house, insult the intelligence of the people, and are an embarrassment to the government.

How Khaleda Zia can conclude that he is doing a defensible job either as home minister or as representative of the BNP government is beyond me.

Let us look at the condition of law and order during Altaf's tenure as home minister. The record is a litany of failure that would long ago have caused any sentient politician to resign in shame and humiliation.

Put simply, the law and order situation in Bangladesh would be a joke if the consequences were not

so grim. As it is, the crime and lawlessness that dominate the country are no laughing matter. It is a matter of public record that crime is out of control. In its two and a half year tenure, the BNP government has been either unable or unwilling to stem this flow of crime.

The home minister's poor record is there for everyone to see. It does not take great powers of perception to note the precariousness of the country's law and order situation. The difficulty is knowing

paying extortionists is a way of life for small businessmen and traders and where gangsters control entire neighbourhoods. Murder, armed robbery, and rape occur on a daily basis.

Then there has been the systematic and organised violence against one or the other of the country's minority populations that has reared its ugly head these last few years. Once again, the home ministry has been unable to protect these vulnerable groups and utterly unable to bring to book the

intemperate response to street demonstrations that have occurred on his watch. Rallies, processions and hartals have routinely been broken up with a great deal of brutality and those involved have been clubbed and beaten mercilessly.

Take the series of hartals called by the opposition AL this month. Now, regardless of what one thinks of hartals in principle and this paper's policy has been to oppose hartals under all circumstances -- most people would agree that

of the politicians... Awami League leaders Saber Hossain Chowdhury and Ahsanullah Master MP were not injured by police personnel. Rather, they hurt themselves by falling on the road in a melee during hartals hours."

It is truly astonishing that a cabinet minister would have the temerity to misrepresent facts to the parliament. One wonders whether he is aware that we live in an age where the truth can be captured on film. Does he not care about the photographic evidence

motorcade by pro-government Parbatya Samo Adhikar Andolon activists:

"The Sama Adhikar Andolon was enforcing a peaceful blockade programme demanding annulment of the so-called CHT peace treaty and resignation of Santu Larma... Gano Forum leader Dr. Kamal, with a large motorcade carrying anti-government activists, tried to get past the blockade. As the general public tried to resist them, the armed opposition activists attacked them."

I really do not have much to add by way of condemnation of this mendacity on the part of the home minister. The truth of the matter is known to everyone, and his own words disgrace Altaf far worse than any denunciation I could possibly add. But with this statement, Altaf has crossed the line once again. This time there must be consequences.

Altaf has turned into an embarrassment for the government. He is the type of politician who is bringing the BNP into disrepute. The prime minister should waste no time in instructing him to withdraw his statement to the JS about the attack on Dr. Kamal's motorcade. Failure to do so leads to the unavoidable conclusion that she approves of the job he is doing and endorses his statement to the JS.

That directly contradicts his statement? Is he not aware of the photograph of Ahsanullah being clubbed to the ground by the police that made the front pages of the nation's newspapers? Does he have so little concern for the truth, for the intelligence of the public, for the honour and dignity of the JS, and for the reputation of his party, that he can make such statements with a straight face? Apparently so.

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Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

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where to start cataloging the many failures and having enough time and space to list them all.

We live in a country where even prominent and influential businessmen can seemingly be abducted with impunity. Their best bet is simply to pay the ransom asked for their freedom, as the authorities appear utterly unable to secure their release in any other way.

The abduction of businessman Jamaluddin in Chittagong is only one of a number of cases that remain unsolved to this day.

We live in a country where

perpetrators of these kinds of assaults.

The evidence of the minister's ineffectiveness is endless.

And these are just the main stories. I have not even touched upon the plentitude of daily misery inflicted on the population in the absence of law and order. People live in fear. Ask anyone on the street what their pre-eminent concern is and they will tell you it is the deterioration in the law and order situation.

On top of the daily sufficiency of crime that we have grown accustomed to, has been Altaf's

brutal and indiscriminate lathi charges against demonstrators, including women, are probably not the best way to counter them. But that was the solution that our home minister, in his infinite wisdom, came up with.

As if that was not bad enough, the minister then went to the JS and denied that any such thing had taken place. Let us look at his statement:

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whole of it. It should have shifted the battleground to an alternative vision of a better future that promised growth along with equality and justice. Instead of promising a future it has become embroiled in a losing argument about the immediate past.

There are other problems. Those who advise Sonia Gandhi are clearly oblivious to echoes. For instance, a mass-contact programme is something you do between elections, not during them. Visiting the far corners of the country is something a Congress president should have been doing over four years, not over four months. Care for farmers is not something you discover a few weeks before they head for the polls. Where was the mass-contact programme after the Gujarat riots?

The Congress is suffering from evident depression since no one in the party seriously believes that it can form a government this year. The prospect of another five years in the wilderness can weaken the heart of any sixty-year-old (check the age of the "young" leaders of the Congress):

Here is a tip for all BJP candidates: get out of Atal Behari Vajpayee's way. Don't come

will rake in votes. True, governance is a debilitating business.

But Sushil Shinde is not a pushover like his predecessor Vilasrao Deshmukh. Shinde and Sharad Pawar have been old allies who as an alliance are at least one street ahead of the Sena-BJP combination. In Uttar Pradesh the BJP corrected some of its weaknesses precisely because it was not complacent. In Bihar the party knows that it has a difficult battle. But in Maharashtra it is taking the vote for granted.

The 4-party government of Khaleda Zia doesn't believe in the politics of having politicians beaten by police. The present government respects honour and dignity

There will be those who argue that Indira Gandhi pole-vaulted the Congress to a two-thirds majority in 1971 after its thin victory in 1967. But that is not an exact parallel. Indira Gandhi split the Congress in 1969 and left the incumbency baggage on the rump she left behind.

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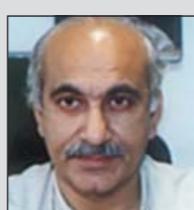
Such shortcomings are not going to be filled by the induction of the next generation. Priyanka Gandhi might energise a single constituency; she is not going to deliver Uttar Pradesh. And those in the Congress who think that she should replace her mother as the next president in case the Congress drops even below the level of limited expectations, should rise above sycophancy. There is nothing wrong about Priyanka Gandhi becoming Congress leader when she has shown the maturity to do so. There is everything wrong about turning the Congress into family property.

Defeat is not an option that the BJP is willing to consider, but embarrassment is always a possibility. The real danger before the BJP is not that it could lose the elections -- but that it could end up one apple short of a picnic.

That missing apple could be somewhere in Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## The missing apple



M.J. AKBAR

If anything is only as strong as its weakest link, then Indian democracy took a quantum leap forward last week. The Muslims of Uttar Pradesh deserve serious congratulations for rejecting the politics of patronage and manipulation with the contempt it has always deserved and rarely got. Better still, their means was laughter, not anger. The form is as important as content, for anger encourages tension and laughter is a sign of political maturity.

Patronage is always cynical. Politicians have convinced themselves that the Congress model for Muslims continues to work -- that they can ignore the Muslim need for education, empowerment and an economy for five years and woo them with a religious crumb or two just before they queue up to vote. Mulayam Singh Yadav thought that the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh would do some extra rikat of namaaz in order to beseech the Almighty for his electoral success when he ordered state institutions to shut down for Friday prayers. The Muslims replied that they did not need Yadav to lead them towards Allah. Thanks, but no thanks. He could take his sops elsewhere.

It is possibly the first time in electoral politics that a community has placed rational logic above prejudice. I am proud of the fact that Indian Muslims have taken a lead that others should emulate.

Such crumbs come with a heavy if hidden price tag. This is the sort of thing that lends weight to the BJP charge of minority appeasement.

A rather evocative phrase from the language of Uttar Pradesh describes the syndrome rather well: "Lene ke dene parh jaate hain" (Instead of receiving you end up giving).

Muslims have suffered enough of such exploitation. Within 24 hours

Mulayam had to withdraw from such unwanted generosity.

Ironically, it was Yadav who

played a critical role in the

maturing of the Muslim vote when he called the expanding bluff of

But explanation is not expiation.

The curve balls and googlies of UP politics are important because the fate of the next Lok Sabha will be decided in the three big, uncertain states of UP, Bihar and Maharashtra. The definitive word is "big"; the operative word is "uncertain". Between the three they command 168 seats. The electoral situation in the rest of the country is more or less evident, barring a slip-up or two.

The Northeast will vote against the establishment; Bengal will remain with the Left. Jayalalitha should pull in Tamil Nadu, as

should Navin Patnaik (despite

the Shahi Imam of Delhi some half

a dozen years ago on the eve of yet another crucial election. The Shahi Imam's self-appointed

status as the wholesale dealer of

the Indian Muslim vote began life

with the 1977 general elections

when he mobilised the community

against Indira Gandhi's Emergency. But it acquired credibility only when Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna and Indira Gandhi

signed a "pact" with him before the 1980 general elections. The balloon had been expanding ever

since, until the Yadav pinprick.

Yadav simply told the Shahi Imam

that he could not care one way or

the other what the Imam said or did.

The Muslims proved Yadav right,

for they ignored the Imam and voted for Yadav. Why then

such a silly mistake in 2004? The only explanation can be weak-minded advice from the cluster of

insecure Muslims around Yadav.

surrendering some seats), both

with BJP help. Ditto Chandrababu Naidu, once again with BJP help.

Kerala will turn Left, and

Karnataka will split three ways.

Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh/Chhattisgarh have

become BJP fortresses. Punjab

will turn against the Congress

while Haryana will vote for the

Congress.

But if the BJP thinks it has

already won the elections, it

should invest in a cold glass of

water, known to be good for