

## Extra-judicial killings

*Time to call a spade a spade*

UNTIL now we have exercised caution in writing about the subject of 'crossfire' killings, but in keeping with our role as a conscientious newspaper, we feel the time for such reticence is over as the casualty figure, quite horrendously, is nearing the 250-mark.

Indeed, the time has come to abandon euphemism and openly state that not only is the government following a policy of extra-judicial killing of criminal suspects, but also that the government further demeans itself by its denial of what everyone knows to be true. It has come to a point where the head of the EU in Bangladesh on Sunday had to react.

The problems with the policy are so apparent as to need little elaboration, but as the government seems not to understand, let us restate them here.

First, a climate has been created whereby the rule of law stands effectively undermined. There are now reports of extra-judicial killings by other law enforcement branches. The idea has gained legitimacy, it seems. If mobs now start lynching criminals, suspected or real, then how can the government respond?

Second, the arbitrariness of the procedure is unacceptable. On what basis criminal suspects are chosen for elimination, who lives and who dies, is all in the hands of Rab. They operate as judge, jury, and executioner, and they remain unaccountable and their modus operandi above question. There is no public oversight over the process.

Thirdly, surely we do not have to remind the authorities that extra-judicial killing in the name of crime control is grossly erroneous, because one wrong cannot set another 'wrong' right. Such actions undermine the rule of law which is the foundation of society and are inconsistent with our constitution and the principles of democracy.

If the judicial process is cumbersome and criminals can exploit its loopholes, then the solution should be to fix it, simplify it, rather than using it as a pretext for extra-judicial killings. Investments are now being made to improve our law enforcement capabilities which is where, we believe, the emphasis should be solely laid.

Finally, the government's obvious mendacity on the subject has further diminished its standing in the eyes of the public. The government must call a halt to the policy of extra-judicial killing if it wishes to restore the respect for rule of law that is the foundation of a democratic order and if it wishes to restore respect for its word both inside and outside the country.

## Rice prices too high

*OMS should avoid past pitfalls*

WITH the cereal price spiralling, and putting heavy pressure on the consumers in general, the government has decided to go for open market sale of rice from February 17 across the country. The prices of rice have increased by at least 25 percent in the recent days and continue to rise -- much to the chagrin of buyers.

The crisis is the outcome of a combination of factors. First, the natural calamities have caused a loss of 20 to 25 lakh tonnes of foodgrains. Second, the prices of rice have risen sharply in the international market upsetting all our calculations regarding rice import. Moreover, the diesel price hike impeded irrigation which might hit boro production this season.

The open market sale (OMS) was tried last October when the prices of rice were soaring during the month of Ramadan. But it failed to make much of an impact due, largely, to poor implementation. A number of flaws were detected and it appeared that the programme lacked both logistical support and efficiency and honesty of the rice dealers. It was reported that people in many areas were not even aware of the government move.

So the government has to avoid the pitfalls of the first OMS operation this time around. The emphasis should be on developing an effective distribution mechanism to service the scarcity-stricken areas in particular. It is possible to procure the rice needed to run the OMS programme, but its success will depend on whether the worst-hit people are benefited by it. The government has to ensure that the designated dealers do not resort to any malpractice as was reported last year.

Shortage of foodgrains creates extra pressure when the global situation is also unfavourable. That is the kind of problem we are facing right now. So the government has to maintain a food stock for meeting any emergency and, if required, supply rice for a long time to come. Only sound planning and timely action can see us through the crisis.

## MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

NEWS item: Three more killed in RAB crossfire; with this, the number of deaths in that category since June last year rose to 221.

*"The majority never has right on its side."*  
-- Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*.

THE news item is from The Daily Star of February 9, 2005. By the time these paragraphs go to press, the number is almost certain to be out of date. Among statistics that emerge from Bangladesh nowadays, this must be the fastest growing.

Much has been written about killings in crossfire by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the recently created law enforcement agency that was supposed to stop violent crime, especially killings. Given the prolixity ingrained in our national ethos, one might think enough has been said on the matter. For a change, that would be wrong. Let us talk some more. The national stakes here are very high.

Note that in Bangladesh, English words do not always mean what they say. Innocent-looking words can have quite sinister intents behind them. The killers of the founding father of the nation and his family were, for example, granted immunity from prosecution by an ordinance that "indemnified" the killers, as if they were the people who most deserved indemnity, by which, in ordinary English, one would mean security against harm, or compensation.

The current use of "crossfire" -- a word that has quickly found a place in our vernacular too -- is equally bizarre. That word, in English, is supposed to describe a situation where two parties fire at each other with guns and it so happens that someone is caught in the middle and pays a terrible price for simply being there. The deaths by "crossfire" that newspapers in the country have been reporting in recent times are nothing of the sort: they are in the main cold-blooded shooting of the "criminal" caught by

and kidnapping for ransom had been rising to unprecedented levels. Thanks to the strong arm tactics by RAB, a sense of personal security has returned. People can now sleep peacefully in their homes or go about their business unmolested. They can now build a house or run their shop without having to pay "toll," and parents do not have to worry that their children may not come home from school. One can almost hear a collective sigh of relief.

The attractiveness of the sce-

crossfire of a well-known local criminal might bring about an immediate sense of relief, but this scenario can hardly be extrapolated to the rest of the country.

Crime, of course, has many faces and it is important to recognise that RAB action, or other police action for that matter, has been singularly inadequate in curbing some major categories of crimes that now threaten the very foundations of the society. The focus of attention on the quotidian killings by RAB has tended to obscure two crucial

may have been at the cost of failure in these two critical areas. To conclude from RAB killings that the country is on the threshold of a golden era of peace would be a tragic delusion.

This inevitably brings up the issue of the social priorities. There is little doubt that muggings, extortions, and hijackings have brought misery to large sections of the society. But crimes connected to rising religious fundamentalism and political killings erode the very foundations of that society. Those who applaud RAB "successes" appear to make a facile

perpetuate the very aura of violence that supporters of RAB killings say they abhor. I believe there are two major factors working here: the inability of law enforcing authorities to achieve their goals except through violence of their own is likely to be seen as a weakness by those who commit crime; and the flouting of law by those who are supposed to uphold it is unlikely to raise the public's respect for it.

The means that we choose to achieve a given end are not irrelevant. In a letter to the editor in this newspaper a reader, evidently a supporter of RAB killings, glibly quoted a Bengali saying, the gist of which can be summed up as: you need a thorn to extract another. In the present context, the observation seems to me as dangerous as it is frivolous. Unfortunately he is not alone in his judgment.

Finally, it is often said that a large majority of the population supports the often lethal action of RAB. I do not know of any properly conducted survey of public opinion that leads to the conclusion. But even if a majority of the people of Bangladesh does support RAB crossfire killings, which I doubt, would that make it right? Not all questions can be settled by majority decisions, particularly not questions of right and wrong. Human history is not devoid of instances where majorities were proved dreadfully wrong in retrospect.

Mahfuzur Rahman is a former United Nations economist.

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## RAB.

Crossfire is a euphemism that shelters a gross wrongdoing behind a facade of innocence. There is little doubt that much of RAB "crossfire" killings are deliberate acts to eliminate "criminals" from society without due process of law. It so happens that many believe this indeed is the case. It is seen as an open secret. And many approve of it.

Those who sanction such killings make a starkly simple point. Normal police action, or rather the lack of it, has failed to curb violent crimes. Murder, mugging, hijacking, extortion ("toll" collection, in local par-

nario should be overwhelming but for a number of major caveats. The first of these is empirical. Has RAB action actually turned the country, or even a good part of it, into a haven of peace and tranquillity? I do not think even the most ardent supporter of the killings really believes it has. To be sure, the elimination of some thugs in some localities, especially in large cities, has reduced crime. But the size of RAB is simply too small, and the level of its technical competence still too low, to bring about a significant country-wide improvement in crime statistics. For a select community, the killing in

aspects of that failure: the rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism and the criminal activities that have accompanied it, and the recent spate of political assassinations, the latest of which was the killing of SAMS Kibria. In neither of these categories of crime has there been any progress in finding the perpetrators of the crimes, far less punishing them. And who is to say that these criminal activities are any less deserving of attention of the law enforcing agencies than crimes normally pursued by RAB? At the most generous interpretation of the situation, the "success" by the Battalion

choice of some short term gains, to the exclusion of other, far weightier and longer term, considerations. We must ask ourselves where our society is heading.

A tolerant, pluralist society remains, I hope, an overriding long-term national goal, and is not something that exists only in the minds of a few liberal thinkers and dreamers. That goal cannot be achieved through violence of any kind, particularly not one at the hands of a law enforcement authority that has been tasked to end violence. In fact, extra-judicial killings and other acts that usurp the rule of law will help to

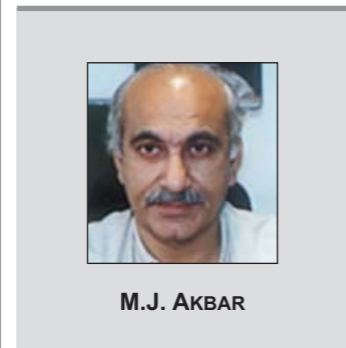
It is curious that the United States, formally engaged in a world-wide war against terrorism, seems so disengaged about the one country that would fit many of the paradigms that it has designed to describe the syndrome. There is credible evidence that North Korea supplied uranium to Libya when Colonel Gaddafi was a customer. Its missiles are among the best in the world. What more does North Korea have to do to identify itself as a possible if not active problem? One is not suggesting that Washington leap into war, which of necessity must remain the last option. But question marks do begin to arise against George Bush's apparent indifference. His predecessor Bill Clinton showed sustained concern and involved North Korea in a dialogue that showed some promise. George Bush has two eyes as well, but they are focused on only one point.

Is this because North Korea is not situated in the Middle East, astride substantive energy resources? Would George Bush have ordered another mobilisation if Pyongyang was where Baku is? "Let the neighbours worry; we have other things to do" -- would this have been the response if Syria had eight active nuclear bombs, the possibility of many more, and a missile delivery system that had a market around the world?

Such questions seek an answer, but there is a secondary problem: who is now credible enough to give an acceptable answer? Is it time to turn the United Nations into an NGO for tsunami relief and hand over such questions to a new world body? Is a veto by a victor of a war that ended sixty years ago still the means to a solution? I don't know the answers to the previous questions, but I know the answer to the last one. No.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

# The answer alas is 'no'



M.J. AKBAR

North Korea has claimed formally, officially, unambiguously, repeatedly? Have different standards been allotted to different regions of the world?

According to Leonard Spector, deputy director of the Monterey Institute Center for Nonproliferation Studies, writing for YaleGlobal Online, the United States has assessed that North Korea has an arsenal of "roughly eight plutonium-based weapons, and it is known to have production capacity for

state is far too high simply because of the horrendous damage it could cause even in its descent into defeat and destruction. North Korea has already indicated its missile capability by "mistakenly" sending a missile over Japan. So while it might not be able to threaten the United States, it remains a serious concern to South Korea and Japan, the bulwark American allies in the region. The threat of havoc makes nuclear weapons a supremely powerful deterrent. Israel has insured its

explicit, the second implicit. That was why there was little or no protest when China went nuclear in 1964, despite being outside the UN regime at America's insistence (China's seat was held by Taiwan). The rest of the world was offered sermons when it sought nuclear capability.

Jawaharal Nehru responded with a ruse. Conscious also of the Gandhi mantle that the Congress leadership still wore, he made disarmament the policy but encour-

age of expanding knowledge is the possibility of a garage bomb (a home-made nuclear device) being used by a terrorist group. Other nightmares include chemical, biological, and radiological weapons being used against civil society. It is important, therefore, to identify a rogue state (or, more accurately, a rogue government) that would feel no sense of obligation to world order, and actively connive with terrorist groups or organisations.

Of course it is necessary here to

## BYLINE

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roughly one weapon per year." North Korea also has facilities for enriching uranium, another actual or potential source for nuclear weapons. So what happens? Nothing. So why isn't anyone interested in spreading democracy to North Korea? South Koreans have democracy. America already has troops on the North Korean border. It does not need United Nations authorisation for mobilisation. And yet a great deal of nothing continues to happen. America urges Pyongyang to engage in talks, and offers scaled levels of incentives for de-weaponisation. When Iran is already engaged in talks with France, Germany, and Britain over its nuclear status, Vice President Dick Cheney coyly suggests that Israel could, or perhaps should, bomb Iran, while Condoleezza Rice icily suggests that the time for an invasion of Iran has not arrived "as yet."

One problem, of course, is real-ism. The cost of invading a nuclear national security by going nuclear, a right denied to any of its antagonists. If Saddam actually had nuclear weapons, would America and Britain have invaded the country? That might be called the nuclear paradox. But the world's nuclear regime was challenged and changed not in East Asia but in South Asia. The world, as defined by the victors of World War II, was fundamentally altered in the summer of 1998 when India conducted three nuclear tests at Pokharan on May 11, and followed it up with two low-yield explosions on May 13. On May 28 and 30, Pakistan joined the nuclear club with five tests in the Chagai hills of Baluchistan. The two rewards that the five victors of World War II (America, Soviet Union, Britain, France, and China) reserved for themselves were a veto in the Security Council of the United Nations and the right to nuclear weapons. The first was

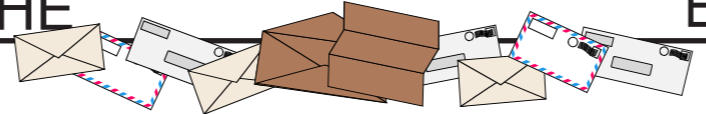
aged India's scientists to develop independent nuclear facilities. Indira Gandhi made this official with the Pokharan test in 1974. Pakistan began to build its bomb only after 1974, but by 1998 had acquired sufficient capability for psychological parity. In the past seven years arsenals and improved their delivery systems. The geopolitical implications will be more apparent over time, particularly if tensions between India and Pakistan begin to come down.

The reality is that the nuclear club now consists of eight members and there is nothing much that anyone can do about at least seven of them. The jury is out on the eighth, North Korea. Does North Korea constitute a case for separate treatment? One concern that the rational world shares above the host of differences in approach and policy is that terrorism is an unacceptable threat to stability and civilisation. One of the genuine nightmares in an

define terms that we are using. An enemy government does not automatically become a rogue government. For more than four decades the western Anglo-European alliance led by America fought a cold war against the Soviet-led alliance that often simmered with a great deal of heat, but while either side had the power to blow up the world many times over neither did so. Even when one of the protagonists accepted de facto defeat, its government did not launch nuclear missiles in despair or anger. India and Pakistan have come to the brink as well after going nuclear, but have (perhaps to the disappointment of interventionists) behaved responsibly. If there is uncertainty, then it is only about the government of Kim Jong-Il, son of a "Dear Leader" whose deadly idiosyncrasies were in the Idi Amin mould, and who runs a closed, totalitarian state that hides famine behind a cloak of terror. These are widely accepted perceptions.

Such questions seek an answer, but there is a secondary problem: who is now credible enough to give an acceptable answer? Is it time to turn the United Nations into an NGO for tsunami relief and hand over such questions to a new world body? Is a veto by a victor of a war that ended sixty years ago still the means to a solution? I don't know the answers to the previous questions, but I know the answer to the last one. No.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

## Hartal

Last few months most of us were building our hope and aspirations looking into the various and increased interests shown by the international business community. It accumulated to US\$ 7 billion and jobs for thousands. But all of a sudden our hopes were dashed, Tata's committee returned, Malaysian PM's visit cancelled and the curtain of the summit dropped before it was raised. And now the country is at war with itself.

As it appears, the tunnel is getting darker and no technicians are on sight to put some light in it. All technicians are on vacation, designers lost their drafting tools, policy makers found no guidelines yet they are at ease as they are still employed. Hungry workers at their abysmal conditions are crying for help, their sustenance is at stake. How the tools can be found, a sustainable guideline put in place, it seems no one is bothered.

Purposeful chaos is created rather to benefit from it.

A few for some reason are uttering the truth but what is holding them back to take a lead, mobilise the resources that is required and make a change for our desperate destitute masses. Calling a hartal is much easier than arranging protests and mobilising opinions, which can bring the real (force for) change. But hard work, good motivation have disappeared from our policy makers' minds. Therefore our sufferings will continue till the time line not yet visible.

**MM Haque**  
Jeddah, KSA

## Should we not rethink?

Do we not have enough arguments that we review our role in the three-nation gas pipeline meeting? It has been well said by Indian press in many words that the reasons cited by India for the

postponement of the Saarc summit are not genuine and well founded. And if the situation in Nepal is treated as one of the reasons it would have been more relevant and important if the meet was convened with special emphasis on Nepal's state of affairs and our prevailing conditions. But instead they opted for the negative approach! I hail the Indian press and criticise our media for not highlighting the failures of Indian diplomacy as in the words of The Asian Age (that) "India has created more problem than it has resolved".

**AF Rahman**  
On e-mail

## Put forth aptly

This refers to the letter of Zeeshan K. Huq (writing from Vietnam) DS 9.2.2005. Before going to the main topic it is in order that the DS get some credit for the eye-catching getup put for the letter with the photograph of the India prime minister in person and

shadow (or may we say in silhouette) indicating something to ponder upon.

Although I do not fully subscribe to Zeeshan's views, nevertheless, they have a point indeed, probably because, some Bangladeshi expatriates naturally may have a bird's eye view. Seventh time Saarc summit postponement with Indian unwillingness to attend six times thus far, is bound to go down to history. Given that our big brothers always have the upperhand in such cases, Bangladesh must now learn to make the best use of its potentialities and growing maturity.

Having said that, I would like to remind you of the fact that geographically we must take the advantage of being the country of the estuary and a delta that could historically never be rode against the nature -- the people. All we need is some stability within ourselves.

**Fazal Mohammad Dani**

## Jahangirnagar University

### Fading democracy

Bangladesh as a nation and as a democracy is fading away. I do not understand, why the people, go to the polls every five years to elect a new gang of polished robbers to loot the wealth of the hard working people and plunge the society into distress and despair. Very recently, the assassination of the former finance minister is in itself a message that nobody in the country is safe. The attempt on the life of the leader of the opposition is another of many instances of the failure of the government. Today Bangladesh is nothing less than a totalitarian dictatorship veiled in the name of democracy. Continuous anarchy and rampant corruption have made the country a futile existence. Finally, after 35 years of independence the saying "Bangladesh is a bottomless basket." is given a whole new meaning. Aggression towards religious minorities, a wobbly economy and a gang of squabbling politicians made Bangladesh nothing less than a failure. In this turmoil, questions on social security in the parliament are termed as "irrelevant". I really do not understand how holding on to the government at the height of mounting failures can be called relevant?

I appeal to men at the helm to rise above the level of petty politicking.

**Khalid Rahman**  
London, UK

Democracy in deathbed

Democracy perhaps needs more than 15 years to cross the childhood! We saw the birth of a child democracy in Bangladesh, as the then politicians said in 1991 with the end of the autocratic rule of HM Ershad. Now in the year 2005, discussants (are they one of those politicians) found that the child democracy is in deathbed (The Daily Star, 10 February, 2005). Nothing surprising when viewed in light of child mortality and morbidity

in Bangladesh! Indeed the child mortality and morbidity in Bangladesh is much higher due to malnutrition and many other reasons. Alas! We failed to provide proper nutrition to keep the child democracy growing. The last sentence of that report was again astonishing: lively (!) discussion on the dying democracy.

We need the right person in the right position everywhere in our society. We need those who know when, what and how to feed or how to serve or where and how to apply the proper medicine to heal the dying child democracy. We may need a change in leadership.

**M Tariqur Rahman**  
On e-mail

## Disgraceful

News about the poor people who work in our homes being tortured is not anything new. We witness many incidents in our country that are almost monstrous. People are killing people for no reason. We see

dishonesty and crime all over Bangladesh. It was not like this even 10 years ago. People are getting ruthless and selfish.

Torturing maidservants is one the most popular(!) pastimes for some people. Our maidservants depend on us and in a way we are dependent on them. That does not mean we will give them ill-treatment. Beating and torturing our maidservants is a heinous crime and we should be ashamed of ourselves. Are we still living in the medieval age?

**Muftah Wali**  
Department of English,  
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