

Stop crossfire killings, now

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most disadvantaged individual. The modern state, through the organ of the judiciary, has been given the power to put someone to death. We underscore the fact that the judiciary is the only organ of the state, not the executive or the legislative, that enjoys this exceptional power. The judiciary has been allowed this power under very special circumstances and that also after a thorough and lengthy process of law has been completed. Why has so much pre-condition been imposed on the judiciary before it can exercise its power of sentencing someone to death? Simply because life is the Creator's greatest gift to Humankind and the "Right to Life" is the most fundamental of Universally recognized human rights, and once taken it can never be restored.

The "crossfire" phenomenon has demolished our claim to be a society under law. Today we have a special force that has been surreptitiously empowered to kill. Not only can it kill at will, it can literally pick up anybody with significant, insignificant or no criminal record and put him (so far there has not been any woman) to the so-called crossfire and kill him. We have also learnt that people who have been otherwise killed in a "crossfire", as if that legitimates a murder. Please keep in mind that this is not a section of the law enforcement machinery that has gone astray and is on a killing spree on its own without the knowledge of the authority. No, this is a specially constituted and trained body that has been given the 'go ahead' by a democratically elected government to kill people with a high record of criminal activity. If this is not a declaration of no-confidence in the judiciary by the government then what is? This method of killing criminals has been consciously, deliberately and willfully chosen to bypass the judicial process. Can we still claim to believe in our constitution?

Private explanation of the policymakers is that a combination of inadequate investigative capacity, lack of forensic and related infrastructure, corrupt police and public prosecutors, lack of protection of the witnesses, and malpractice by a section of the lower judiciary have made it impossible for criminals to be tried, punished and jailed through the ordinary court of law. Endless lists of criminals caught by the police, on occasions after extremely difficult operations who have got bail and resumed their criminal activities, are presented to argue that through the normal process criminality cannot be contained. Any suggestion for police and judicial reforms is seen as a prolonged and cumbersome process to reduce crime rate in the short run.

In the media know the reality and to an extent sympathise with the authorities. We have also acknowledged from time to time that serious crimes actually came down to an extent after the launching of Rab. That is perhaps why the media in general has been rather muted in their protest at these extra-judicial killings -- for a time. But things have gone too far and time has come to put an end to the denigration of our judicial system.

New pay scale may

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candidates to the civil service, in competition with the private sector," observed WB Country Director Christine I Wallich in a letter to the government. It will also affect the motivation of the existing senior government officers, she added.

The letter accompanied a WB policy note on public administration and governance policy to Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Dr Kamal Uddin Siddiqui sent at the end of June. Wallich wrote, "More efficient and transparent forms of compensation, including monetizing in-kind benefits and aligning pay more closely with comparators in the rest of the job market could enhance 'incentives and motivation'."

The policy note pointed out that although the increase in compensation awarded by the government is somewhat less than that recommended by the pay commission it will provide some increase in real terms, particularly at the employees level.

This is because nominal increases in monetary compensation for most existing employees through annual increment in basic pay and allowances since FY98 appear to have almost offset the 43 percent cumulative inflation in the intervening period. But, excluding pay progression due to time scale, selection grade or promotion, the real pay of officers has significantly eroded, by 2 to 25 percent, since the last pay revision in FY98. In comparison, the real pay of most categories of employees has increased modestly, by 1 to 6 percent, and declined but marginally for others, the note explained.

Again, the ratio of basic pay at the highest to the lowest levels declined from 40:1 in the early 1970s to 10:1 in the first half of FY05 and 9.6:1 under the new pay scale. While the ratio of monetary compensation declined from 25.5 in FY72 to 6.4 in the first half of FY05, and this could come down to around 6 with the full implementation of the pay scale and allowances, the note elaborated.

Therefore, it said, "The compressed compensation structure provides inadequate pay differentials to reflect differences in skill and substantive job challenges, and will need to be addressed to enhance the government's ability to attract the 'brightest and the best' candidates to the civil service, in competition with the private sector."

In this context, the WB advised to restore the gap between the mon-

Since June 2004, 378 persons' lives have been taken illegally. In other words they all have been killed in the so-called crossfire. As explained in routine and repeated police handouts, a crossfire death occurs when police or Rab, after interrogation of a suspected criminal, take(s) him to a given address to recover arms, and the waiting family members of the person in custody open fire in which the 'criminal' in custody dies. This story has been repeated 378 times.

Believing the police version means that we have to accept that on each occasion they foolishly stepped into a trap that was laid down by the associates of the criminal in custody. We are also to believe that our criminals are far better informed about the movements of Rab than Rab about the criminals. Otherwise how can they ambush Rab and the police all the time? We are also to believe that Rab and police made the same mistake 378 times? If yes, then what sort of professional force Rab and police are that they habitually step into traps of the criminals? Are they so foolish, so incompetent, so incapable of learning from experience? And how come in the ensuing exchange of fire nobody else dies except the criminal in custody?

To go straight to the point, the crossfire stories are lies and everybody involved knows it. The authorities are so brazen about telling these lies that they don't even bother to change any version of it knowing fully well that they sound increasingly unbelievable as they recycle the same story over and over again. When official government bodies, such as the police or Rab, brazenly lie(s) in full public glare, and repeatedly so, it reveals a level of disrespect for the public intelligence that can only be compared to a Goebbelsian mindset which subscribed to the view that repeating a lie many times makes the public accept it as true.

Allowing an official entity to circumvent the legal system, especially giving it power to carry out extra-judicial killings, is the most unthinkable act any government, especially one that has been elected by the people, can commit. It is only a matter of time that such power will lead to its most gross and vile use. Tragically we have already seen dangerous signs of that. According to our own investigation, 14 people, among the 378 so far killed, have had no or only minor criminal records. Of the others, there are many who are criminals but not deserving the death penalty. We have also seen examples of fabrication of facts to cover up killings of the innocent.

The case of the college student, Masum, is most tragic and illustrative. He had no criminal records in any complaint with any of the police stations of the city. Yet, on July 8th, at about 9:00pm he was picked up by a plainclothes policeman from a family function from a community centre in Mohammadpur. His parents waited till 11:00pm at the centre and after that spent the whole night searching for him. In the morning, the parents heard on the TV news that Masum died in a "crossfire". We

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Traffic sergeants flagged down the speeding buses and other vehicles on the Manik Mia Avenue and instantly checked the computer findings. They compared it with the chart that contains Bangladesh standards and sent it to the magistrate present at the site.

The court found that the buses, covered vans and maxis they stopped were emitting black smokes several times higher than the permissible limit of 65 points, polluting the air.

The magistrate said that they were puzzled to see plenty of false documents that were produced by the drivers. He said, "Most of these buses are totally unfit for plying the street. I think we should also think of writing them off after on-the-spot fitness check".

The joint drive will soon resume.

11 militants

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The diaries carry a number of "scary lessons" including details on arms, ammunition and detonators.

Golam Mustafa, a 4th year student of Arabic at Rajshahi University, took the pseudonym for the training programme, said the investigators.

Hailing from Shekherbhita in Jamalpur district, Mustafa, 25, was a resident of Madar Bux Hall of RU and was engaged with the Ahle Hadith Jubo Shanga, the youth front of militant Ilinchpin Asadullah Al Galib's Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (Ahab).

An investigator said, "No other except Mustafa among the 11 has shown so much similarity with the handwriting of the diary. Yet it would be too early to declare him definitely as Asian."

The police sent his handwriting to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for expert examination whether he is the writer of the diary.

A NEW DANGEROUS ISLAMIC OUTFIT

Studying the recovered diaries, the investigators reached the primary conclusion that the "group is more dangerous than any other Islamic outfit in the country."

The militant group has members from Bangla Bhai's Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMB) and his spiritual leader Abdur Rahman's Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Asadullah Al Galib's Ahab.

Enamul, the team leader, had been involved with the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) before he joined the JMB nearly a year ago. Golam Mustafa and Ibrahim Hossain, both RU students, claimed themselves as ICS activists.

FOREIGN TECHNIQUES

The sources said the militants have learnt 12 types of "field crafts" (combative term of physical exercise) while the police and army are taught only 10 types.

The families of each victim may get Tk 3-5 lakh as compensation after the court verdict and it may take two to three months, sources said, adding that Saudi police is keeping watch on the owner.

The expatriates ministry sent the bodies to the respective village homes on microbuses and made arrangement for their burial at its expenditure.

The dead are: Rafiqul Islam, son of Saidur Rahman, Narail, Mohammad Nurun Nabi, son of late Shafiqullah, Sonagazi, Feni, Mohammad Nizam Uddin, son of Abu Saleh, Laksham, Comilla, Abdur Rob, son of Wazirul Ramganj, Laxmipur, Abu Naser, son of Abdus Sattar, Senbagh, Noakhali, Khurshid Alam, son of Belayet Hossain Chatkhil, Noakhali, and Mohammad Nasir, son of Habib Mian, Brahmanbaria.

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Five souls in dowry

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But the in-laws did not welcome Nurpur, as they found she came from a poor family without any dowry. Her mother-in-law Aina Bibi and her daughter started to press her incessantly to get Tk 1 lakh and, as she failed, started to torture her with her husband playing the comfortable role of a silent spectator.

Aina forced Nurpur to send her son Rabbi to Nurpur's mother, while she was carrying another baby. After the second child was born, Aina gave it away to taxi driver Keherman of the same village.

Nurpur and her mother sought help from the local union parishad chairman and other influential neighbours, who rescued her child after 17 days.

As a pretext to force her to leave the family, Aina then spread a cooked story that Nurpur had stolen a gold chain. But Nurpur resolved to stay on.

While Nurpur was lying on a bed after a round of quarrel on June 27, her husband poured kerosene on her body and set fire to it. As a burning Nurpur started to cry for help, Hanif closed the door from outside.

Nurpur found a pitcher in the room, poured the water on her body and extinguished the fire. But it had already burnt her upper body from the waist.

As neighbours rushed in, Hanif opened the door and started scolding her for attempting to commit suicide and put him in trouble. "Why don't you just return the gold chain, you stole and leave the house?" he shouted. They confined Nurpur to that room without any treatment.

Aleya was burned in the same way. Her husband, medicine trader Delwar Hossain of Kadamtala in Siddhiganj set fire to her when she was sleeping at around 2:00am on May 21 for her failure to pay him Tk 1 lakh in dowry.

With a 70 percent burnt body, Aleya is undergoing treatment at the DMCH. There is no one to whom she can turn for a shelter.

The dire poverty even forced Nurpur to leave the hospital on Monday, letting go the only treatment available to her. Her mother, sister and son had been attending her at the DMCH. But as Mariani had not a penny in savings and could not earn any, being at her daughter's side in the hospital, the four of them had been going without adequate food, accommodation and other amenities.

So, though Nurpur's burns were on the mend, she could no longer bear the troubles her family members had been going through for her sake and left the DMCH on Monday. Survival of her family seemed to be more important to her than the remedy of her painful burns.

ASTORY THAT NEVER ENDS

Nurpur's story is not a unique one. Sufia Begum, 25, Shilpi Akhtar Mariani, 25, Aleya Begum, 33, and Shamima Akbar, 20, all coming from the lower echelon of the society, fell prey to their husbands' and in-laws' greed and cruelty in the same way.

Assisted by his brothers and sister, Selim Sheikh poured kerosene on and set fire to his wife Sufia while she was sleeping with her two sons -- 2-month-old Imon and three-year-old Sumon -- at their house at Dinañathpara village in Lohagara, Narail in October last.

They tortured her throughout the next day, asking her to bring Tk 50,000 from her uncle's house. As she failed, they kicked her out.

Some neighbours rescued her. She was treated at Narail Health Complex for seven months and then transferred to the DMCH in the first week of May. Doctors had to cut off all the fingers of her left hand and two of the right hand, as those were beyond cure. The remaining three fingers have become stiff.

With serious burns on most of her

body, her skin has shrunk and the legs and hands have become rigid. Doctors said she needs plastic surgery and a long time for a full cure.

Another dowry victim, Shilpi Akhtar of East Zurain in the capital, woke up in the early morning of May 29 to find her husband Abdur Rashid standing near with a knife. "As I opened my eyes, he started to stab me indiscriminately," she told The Daily Star.

She was admitted to the One Stop Crisis Centre of the DMCH and was released after treatment in the last week of June.

Shilpi met Rashid in 1997 and married him in secret. Rashid then started to press her father Hannan Majhi, a poor security guard, for Tk 1 lakh in dowry. Shilpi also came to know that Rashid had married and divorced three women earlier, who had filed cases against him.

She said, "He started torturing me for the money and my father gave him Tk 90,000 until last year, but nothing could satisfy him."

Rashid demanded Tk 1 lakh more, as a court fined him the amount in a case filed by his third ex-wife. "As we failed, the torture became more intense," Shilpi recalled.

Zafar, husband of the fourth victim Shamina, demanded a large sum to secure a job abroad. But her father Noor Hossain failed to pay up the money. In the first week of June, Zafar locked Shamina in a room, poured kerosene on her and set fire to, burning the most of her body. She succumbed to her injury on June 10.

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World Bank

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During his visit, Patel will call on Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and hold talks with Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman and other senior government officials on matters of mutual interest.

He will also exchange views with local government representatives, private sector and business leaders, representatives from civil society and NGOs, and the development partners on the country's development agenda and how the World Bank group can best assist Bangladesh in achieving its poverty reduction strategy goals.

7 journos

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Choudhury, editor of the Shikol, and Samul Alam of the Gramer Kagoj.

The GD filed with Kotwali Police Station says BNP men on July 13 attacked Abdul Khaleque and his followers when they took out a rally in Mirpur upazila. Khaleque is likely to contest the next general elections from Kushtia-2 constituency as an independent candidate.

The attacker injured at least 50 people and set fire to 14 vehicles without any instigation.

Several local and national dailies had covered the matter, which angered the lawmaker and his men.

Latifur Rahman

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necessary to ensure free and fair elections.

He said strengthening the EC is essential as it plays the principal role in holding the general elections, while the caretaker government just assists it in doing that.

He suggested for the government and the opposition line-up to discuss the reform issues in parliament to settle their disputes.

200 agitating

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Sujon, Julekha Akter Jahan, Shafiqul Islam Shamim, Liqat Ali, Rashidul Islam and Maqbul Hossain addressed the meeting