

Extra-judicial killing and accountability

A J M SHAFIUL ALAM BHUIYAN

I was procrastinating on the pages of The Guardian. Looking at the news related to the recent bombing in London. Along with other news, one story -- the killing of an innocent Brazilian man by London metropolitan police -- caught my eye. The plain-clothes police killed the man at Stockwell tube station on July 22, one day after the second bomb attack on the London transport system, out of suspicion that he was a suicide bomber. When the police shot him he was reportedly wearing a bulky jacket, which is unusual for anyone to wear in London summer, and he did not obey police order. Initially the police were convinced that they meticulously checked all information about him and concluded that he was a suspect of the London bombing.

But after a few days a preliminary investigation by Scotland Yard revealed that the man was innocent and had no connection with the bombing. Consequently it created a huge public outcry in England. Human rights organisations raised their concern. All leading British newspapers came up with stories and commentaries castigating the incident. Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Commissioner for the Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair, apologised publicly for the loss of an innocent life.

No responsible person in Britain tried to justify the killing, using the horrible incident of London bombing as an alibi. Nobody said that it was natural for police to shoot a person because of the pressure and stress they are undergoing as a result of the bombing. Nobody said that the media was doing too much by raising concern about the death of a foreigner, a third world country citizen. There was none to support this police action because everyone knows that killing people without trial is a sin in a democratic society. The police team which took the life is now under investigation by The Independent Police Complaint Commission.

This British story just reminded me about the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) which kills "criminals" in Bangladesh from time to time for the sake of law enforcement. Rab already killed dozens of "criminals" along with some innocent people. It claims that none of the people was killed intentionally. Rather they were victims of "crossfires" or died "in the line of fire." Whatever phrases Rab uses to clean its hands fall in the

public eye. Many leading newspapers of the country have already documented the accounts of many eyewitnesses, proving the Rab claims false. I was thinking, can we dare to ask our minister responsible for Rab for an apology for the killings committed by Rab? As a newly democratic nation are we getting used to accepting extra-judicial killing as normality? The answer to the first question is "no." The answer to the second question is unfortunately "yes" when we take into account the reactions of the ruling party high-ups and their supporters.

Except for a few, many of us seem to be unapologetic about the killings carried out by Rab. Our ministers and other ruling party politicians boast about Rab by saying that it has been able to restrain some criminal activities in the country and believe that citizens from all walks of life approve Rab actions. If they are true, we can assume that the crime rate in the country has fallen. Has it really happened? There are no independent or reliable statistics to support that the crime rate has fallen. The police data on crime which are occasionally made available always show one trend -- the decline of the number of crimes. However, the rising numbers of robberies and homicides make people skeptical about the claim.

After talking to some friends in Dhaka, I realised that many people are definitely happy with the performance of Rab and they feel that Rab is doing the right thing. I have begun to wander why people tend to support extra-judicial killing. I believe people are just happy to see that some form of action has been taken against criminals. They do not judge the merit of the action. Rab killed some identified criminals who terrorised people in various places of the country. People were happy to see the death of these criminals. However, there were also counter tendencies, people were scared to see the death of some innocent civilians.

Security is a basic human need. People need to be felt secured to do their jobs, businesses, and other day to day activities. People deserve to live in a country free from criminals. The police have failed to ensure this. The efficiency of the police has been minimised by the corrupt practices of some police personnel who call the shots in the police department. Some of our politicians also harbour criminals to achieve their narrow political goals.

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Does this man standing guard make you feel safer?

Someone tell the President the war is over

FRANK RICH

LIKE the Japanese soldier marooned on an island for years after V-J Day, President Bush may be the last person in the country to learn that for Americans, if not Iraqis, the war in Iraq is over. "We will stay the course," he insistently tells us from his Texas ranch. What do you mean we, white man?

A president can't stay the course when his own citizens (let alone his own allies) won't stay with him. The approval rate for Mr. Bush's handling of Iraq plunged to 34 percent in last weekend's Newsweek poll -- a match for the 32 percent that approved LBJ's handling of Vietnam in early March 1968. (The two presidents' overall approval ratings have also converged: 41 percent for Johnson then, 42 percent for Bush now.) On March 31, 1968, as LBJ's ratings plummeted further, he announced he wouldn't seek re-election, commencing our long extrication from that quagmire.

But our current Texas president has even outdone his predecessor; Mr. Bush has lost not only the country but also his army. Neither bonuses nor fudged standards nor the faking of high school diplomas has solved the recruitment shortfall. Now Jake Tapper of ABC News reports that the armed forces are so eager for bodies they will flout "don't ask, don't tell" and hang on to gay soldiers who tell, even if they tell the press.

The president's cable cadre is in disarray as well. At Fox News Bill O'Reilly is trashing Donald Rumsfeld for his incompetence, and Ann Coulter is chiding Mr. O'Reilly for being a defeatist. In an emblematic gesture akin to waving a white flag, Robert Novak walked off a CNN set and possibly out of a job rather than answer questions about his role in smearing the man who helped expose the administration's prewar inflation of Saddam WMDs. (On this sinking ship, it's hard to know which rat to root for.)

As if the right-wing pundit crackup isn't unsettling enough, Mr. Bush's top war strategists, starting with Mr. Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard Myers, have of late tried to rebrand the war in Iraq as what the defense secretary calls "a global struggle against violent extremism." A struggle is what you have with your landlord. When the war's uber-managers start using euphemisms for a conflict this lethal, it's a clear sign that the battle to keep the Iraq war afloat with the American public is lost.

That battle crashed past the tipping point this month in Ohio. There's historical symmetry in that. It was in Cincinnati on Oct. 7, 2002, that Mr. Bush gave the fateful address that sped Congressional ratification of the

war just days later. The speech was a miasma of self-delusion, half-truths and hype. The president said that "we know that Iraq and Al Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade," an exaggeration based on evidence that the Senate Intelligence

These are the tea leaves that all Republicans, not just Chuck Hagel, are reading now. New Gingrich called the Hackett near-victory "a wake-up call." The resolutely pro-war New York Post editorial page begged Mr. Bush (to no avail) to "show some leadership"

credentials as a slam-dunk "war president," suitable for a "Top Gun" victory jig -- than to shut down Al Qaeda and smoke out its leader "dead or alive."

But just as politics are a bad motive for choosing a war, so they can be a

bomb in Haditha. But even as he spoke, the war's actual commander, Gen. George Casey, had already publicly set a timetable for "some fairly substantial reductions" to start next spring. Officially this calendar is tied to the next round of Iraqi elections, but it's quite another election this administration has in mind. The priority now is less to save Jessica Lynch (or Iraqi democracy) than to save Rick Santorum and every other endangered Republican facing voters in November 2006.

Nothing that happens on the ground in Iraq can turn around the fate of this war in America: not a shotgun constitution rushed to meet an arbitrary deadline, not another Iraqi election, not higher terrorist body counts, not another battle for Falluja (where insurgents may again regroup, The Los Angeles Times reported last week). A citizenry that was asked to accept tax cuts, not sacrifice, at the war's inception is hardly in the mood to start sacrificing now. There will be neither the volunteers nor the money required to field the wholesale additional American troops that might bolster the security situation in Iraq.

What lies ahead now in Iraq instead is not victory, which Mr. Bush has never clearly defined anyway, but an exit (or triage) strategy that may echo Johnson's March 1968 plan for retreat from Vietnam: some kind of negotiations (in this case, with Sunni elements of the insurgency), followed by more inflated claims about the readiness of the local troops-in-training, whom we'll then throw to the wolves. Such an outcome may lead to even greater disaster, but this administration long ago squandered the credibility needed to make the difficult case that more human and financial resources might prevent Iraq from continuing its descent into civil war and its devolution into jihad central.

Thus the president's claim on Thursday that "no decision has been made yet" about withdrawing troops from Iraq can be taken exactly as seriously as the vice president's preceding fantasy that the insurgency is in its "last throes." The country has already made the decision for Mr. Bush. We're outta there. Now comes the hard task of identifying the leaders who can pick up the pieces of the fiasco that has made us more vulnerable, not less, to the terrorists who struck us four years ago next month.

Courtesy: The New York Times.

Frank Rich is a New York Times columnist.

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Memorial to Iraq war dead set up by anti-war protesters outside Pres. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Committee would later find far from conclusive. He said that Saddam "could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year" were he able to secure "an amount of highly enriched uranium a little larger than a single softball." Our own National Intelligence Estimate of Oct. 1 quoted State Department findings that claims of Iraqi pursuit of uranium in Africa were "highly dubious."

It was on these false premises -- that Iraq was both a collaborator on 9/11 and about to inflict mushroom clouds on America -- that honourable and brave young Americans were sent off to fight. Among them were the 19 marine reservists from a single suburban Cleveland battalion slaughtered in just three days at the start of this month. As they perished, another Ohio marine reservist who had served in Iraq came close to winning a Congressional election in southern Ohio. Paul Hackett, a Democrat who called the president a "chicken hawk," received 48 percent of the vote in exactly the kind of bedrock conservative Ohio district that decided the 2004 election for Mr. Bush.

by showing up in Ohio to salute the fallen and their families. A Bush loyalist, Senator George Allen of Virginia, instructed the president to meet with Cindy Sheehan, the mother camping out in Crawford, as "a matter of courtesy and decency." Or, to translate his Washingtonese, as a matter of politics. Only someone as adrift from reality as Mr. Bush would need to be told that a vacationing president can't win a standoff with a grief-stricken parent commandeering TV cameras and the blogosphere 24/7.

Such political imperatives are rapidly bringing about the war's end. That's inevitable for a war of choice, not necessity, that was conceived in politics from the start. Iraq was a Bush administration idee fixe before there was a 9/11. Within hours of that horrible trauma, according to Richard Clarke's "Against All Enemies," Mr. Rumsfeld was proposing Iraq as a battlefield, not because the enemy that attacked America was there, but because it offered "better targets" than the shadowy terrorist redoubts of Afghanistan. It was easier to take out Saddam -- and burnish Mr. Bush's

doomed engine for running a war. In an interview with Tim Russert early last year, Mr. Bush said, "The thing about the Vietnam War that troubles me, as I look back, was it was a political war," adding that the "essential" lesson he learned from Vietnam was to not have "politicians making military decisions." But by then Mr. Bush had disastrously ignored that very lesson; he had let Mr. Rumsfeld publicly rebuke the Army's chief of staff, Eric Shinseki, after the general dared tell the truth: that several hundred thousand troops would be required to secure Iraq. To this day it's our failure to provide that security that has turned the country into the terrorist haven it hadn't been before 9/11 -- "the central front in the war on terror," as Mr. Bush keeps reminding us, as if that might make us forget he's the one who recklessly created it.

The endgame for American involvement in Iraq will be of a piece with the rest of this sorry history. "It makes no sense for the commander in chief to put out a timetable" for withdrawal, Mr. Bush declared on the same day that 14 of those Ohio troops were killed by a roadside

The devil you think you know

Until today, the Saudis either would not or cannot identify the recruiters of the 15 Saudis who ended up on the planes on 9/11 -- or identify who in Saudi Arabia provided the cash for the attacks. Nor can Abdullah be sure that this grass-roots terrorism will not turn against Al Saud. With problems like these, he's unlikely to begin addressing more basic problems, such as structural unemployment (estimated at 30 percent), runaway population growth and an ultimately fatal dependence on oil.

ROBERT BAER

TEN days ago, in Damascus, I sat down with a Syrian official I've known for years and asked the question on everyone's mind. What's with the jihadists crossing Syria's border into Iraq? There is no way anyone can control a long border like that, he said, sounding the official line. Then he dropped a bombshell. Of 1,200 suspected suicide bombers arrested by Syrian authorities since the beginning of the war in 2003, 85 percent have been Saudis.

Eighty-five percent? This can't be good. Saudi Arabia sits on 25 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. It is the only producer with enough spare capacity to stabilise oil markets during crises. So what if these jihadists crossing from Syria into Iraq decide, sooner or later, to take their war back home, perhaps by attacking the kingdom's oil infrastructure in the same way the Iraqi resistance is doing in Iraq? That's a scenario that keeps Washington awake at night.

Fine, the royal succession went smoothly. Fahd died, his half brother Abdullah ascended the throne and Sultan, the defense minister and Fahd's full brother, became crown prince. Saudis all across the kingdom flocked to swear allegiance to their new king. Oil markets barely moved, thanks largely to presumptions about Abdullah's good intentions. He has proved himself a pragmatic reformer over the past decade, managing the kingdom in the incapacitated Fahd's name, moving against royals' corruption and setting up this year's municipal elections a genuine democratic step. Among commoners at home, he is the most popular prince. Abroad, he's liked because he does not hesitate to goose Saudi production when needed.

But there's a hitch. Like Abdullah himself, at 81, the senior princes are getting old. Who, then,

As a quick fix to this problem the BNP government created the Rab in 2003 and gave it enormous power. If we are willing to give the government benefit of the doubt we can say that the Rab could manage to terrorise some of the criminals.

Killing criminals rather than bringing them to justice may be a short time solution to a chronic problem of the society. However, if the sources of illegal arms cannot be shut down and the political patrons of criminals remain at large, the death of some criminals might intimidate other criminals, but will not stop the breeding of his criminal generations of criminals.

Moreover, extra-judicial killing is a risky business for many good reasons. It is a violation of human rights. Every individual deserves a fair trial. No person is a criminal until the court says so. Extra-judicial killings always involve a risk of getting innocent people killed. We have already seen some instances of this. The killing of a criminal before trial also deprives law enforcement agencies from knowing important information about a crime. Usually no democratic country in the world encourages its law enforcement agencies to kill a criminal. If killing of criminals was a good solution, the countries of Europe and North America which have a solid record of maintaining law and order would do it regularly.

Apologists for Rab killings often argue that the situation of Bangladesh is different from that of developed countries. And these countries do not have as many criminals as Bangladesh has. Fair enough. But it is necessary to think about why it is so. Briefly, the number of crimes and criminals is high in third world countries like Bangladesh because of abject poverty, joblessness, and hopelessness. Robbing people on the street or at home or workplaces seems to be the easiest way for a handful of youths to make money. The inactivity, inefficiency, and inadequacy of laws and law enforcement agencies gives them this false impression.

The failure of the police to maintain law and order in the country prompted the creation of Rab. Compared to the police, Rab members are well trained, well paid, and well equipped. But the success of Rab seems to be very minimal. The Rab threat did not deter criminals from killing popular and prominent parliament members like SAMS Kibria and Ahsanullah Master. Rab could be more effective or useful for the society if it encourages its mem-

bers to find out the sources of illegal arms, identify the political patrons of criminals, and meticulously collect evidence of criminal offences.

In Bangladesh many criminals elude the legal system by using the loopholes and bribing law. The government can rectify the laws and the Rab members can demonstrate their efficiency by making strong cases against criminals. Rab can develop a forensic lab of its own to collect evidences from crime scenes, test DNA, and can develop databases of criminals and create a finger-print database. No criminal can easily get off the hook, if all kinds of evidence of his criminal activity are presented before the court.

Rab has to stop extra-judicial killing at least for the sake of saving innocent lives. And it needs to be accountable to a legitimate body for its actions. If the government fails to make Rab accountable to an independent body there will always be some dangers lurking for us. Think, how would you feel if someone in your family who is innocent is killed by Rab out of suspicion or based on false information? What would happen if the ruling party intends to use Rab for its narrow political purposes? What should we do if Rab begins to be dominated by corrupt elements the way the police are?

The Daily Star reported on July 29 that a new law has been drafted to discipline Rab members and pointed out the limitations of the proposed law. Despite all its inherent problems, I believe it is a good start in developing mechanisms to control Rab members who have already engaged in some unlawful activities. Alongside making such laws we need an independent body, like the British Independent Police Complaint Commission, which will have power and people's confidence to investigate any unlawful activity performed by Rab. Newspapers reported that Rab itself reviewed all the deaths occurred due to the actions of its members and did not find any fault. Nobody should be surprised to hear this. In most cases law enforcement bodies in Bangladesh do not find faults in their own actions.

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Saudi and Kuwaiti border posts. So far it's nothing serious but it could be a harbinger of Iraq's chaos spilling into the kingdom. Iran is no less a problem. Two months ago, in Qum, I spoke with Grand Ayatollah Saanei about the phenomenon of suicide bombings. I expected the usual diatribe against the United States but instead his real anger was directed at the "Wahhabi" suicide bombers, almost all of them Saudis, killing Iraqi Shiites. "They are wolves without pity," he said. "Sooner rather than later, Iran will have to put them down."

Put them down? The ayatollah offered no specifics, but the implications, as Abdullah would interpret them, are profoundly unsettling. Saudi Arabia has a large Shiite minority that sits astride its main oilfields. What would prevent the Iranians from stirring them up? Or redirecting those Saudi jihadists crossing over from Syria?

All this will force Abdullah to face the question of Saudi-backed terrorism. Until today, the Saudis either would not or cannot identify the recruiters of the 15 Saudis who ended up on the planes on 9/11 -- or identify who in Saudi Arabia provided the cash for the attacks. Nor can Abdullah be sure that this grass-roots terrorism will not turn against Al Saud. With problems like these, he's unlikely to begin addressing more basic problems, such as structural unemployment (estimated at 30 percent), runaway population growth and an ultimately fatal dependence on oil.

Saudi royals may have put a good face on the succession. But let's not delude ourselves. When it comes to jitters over Saudi Arabia, we're talking about a lot more than just a spike in oil prices.

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