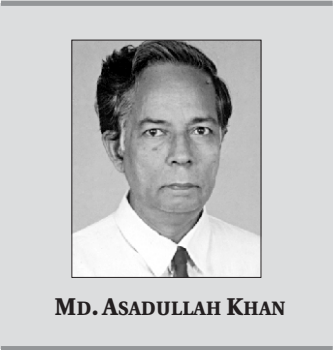


Revenge killing spree taking a dreadful turn



ALMOST awash with guns and plagued by extortionists, business and political feuds, the big cities in the country are struggling to cope with a spate of abduction, violence and killing. True, in an ideal world there are some stories we'd love to avoid: those with an excess of blood and gore. Some of us may find watching films based on such themes entertaining and then go away from the TV screen or movie house with the reassurance that it was all fiction. Sadly true, what is on the silver screen is coming closer to our neighbourhood than we would have thought. There is a general sense of alarm across the country aroused by a spurt in crime targeting the politicians, business people and academics resorted to by rival groups. The murder of Mirpur businessman Haji Shahidullah, chairman of the Prince Group of companies on August 12 last on a public thorough-fare in front of the mosque where he performed his Juma prayer has sent shivers down the spine of the citizenry.

True, once in a while death of such ghastly nature becomes a matter of more

than personal grief. It gives an indication of the social disruption arising out of change in life style, lust for power, wealth and influence in the society and last of all widening gap between the haves and the havenots. Dhaka city's Mirpur area has seen a spate of such killings of ward commissioners and businessmen in the last few months. It is not that events of this kind have never happened before. But in a media-driven environment, private distress of such horrific nature is often catapulted into the public arena. While these cases may hardly affect the mightier matters of state, they certainly reflect the brazenness with which powerful people belonging to either politics or business or even law enforcement machinery feel they can use clout to subvert law and justice and buy everything in their favour.

Reports of gruesome murders published in the newspapers in the recent past quoting Police and Human Rights Organisations reinforce our belief about the horrendous crime situation in the country. These sources indicate that in July last 322 murders were committed in the country as against 314 in June. After a thorough analysis of the violent nature of the problem that are often reported in the newspapers, one is led to believe that young men in the age group 16-30 are involved in such grotesque nature of criminal activities and their behaviour is largely influenced by the environment. In the case of Shahidullah murder, the killer group numbering about three and all of them young in age gunned down him with about eight bullets ensuring his death and as his eldest son Prince, a second year HSC student of Dhamondii Ideal College, came out of the mosque to save his

father, the three shot him in the abdomen wounding him critically.

With extortion, abduction and murder being committed almost every day at different places, the country has turned out to be a killing field. The dastardly killing of a businessman, his wife and their young son at Brahmanbaria early last month in their house at dead of night by some unidentified assailants with no apparent enmity is another pathetic reminder that people are not safe in their houses, too.

political circle by self-seeking politicians and greedy business people, young men, unemployed and in dire need of money, are slipping into crime wave without any pricking of conscience, remorse or consideration of consequences. Astoundingly true, there are about 15 million unemployed youth within 16-25 age group in the country who are profoundly unhappy about the societal conditions and apathy of the government towards creating a situation that helps them rise above the condition they are now living in. These vibrant youth full

common factor is: the present generation is going through one of those plastic moments in history where old known value systems have crumbled and new ones have not formed.

Unfortunately, the pleasures, comfort and luxuries of modern life and acquisition of uncounted wealth by a section of people in the society and the dazzling display of that extravaganza have permeated into our lifestyle and the idealism that once illuminated the educated and even rustic rural life has taken a severe knock. Undeniably true,

path. Sadly true, many of these young men are drawn to crime these days for reasons that are our own making. It occurs when even after going through all the struggles and securing a university degree and technical qualifications most desirable for a job when he moves from door to door for a job, and lack of opportunity and political connection frustrate him. Soon the tremendous pressure to survive and succeed builds up anger and he goes astray. Sanity blinks and so to say totally evaporates. The result becomes disastrous if in the meantime he has

innocent people continue to suffer in the hands of the authority mandated to protect them.

Unhappily, coupled with these dastardly incidents that are coming up with unfailing regularity, economic situation in the country is perhaps heading towards a chaotic turn, with no apparent signs of a redeeming future for the people at large. Precisely true, most of the countryside where 70/75 per cent of the population lives remains as poor as ever. The lower middle class, farmers, rickshaw pullers, day labourers, weavers and fishermen all belonging to this soil just couldn't share the country's economic growth. Sadly enough, a difficult time seem to be winding down well for all of us. As political impasse lingers, reform measures stall, economic woes mount, more and more people with education or no education try to flee the country with little success. As it appears, the government has failed to deliver on its tall promises. What is needed is probity on the part of our leaders and a tough and consistent enforcement of laws. Such measures would reassure investors from within and without who have been fulminating in the hope that the system of kickback flourishing relentlessly would end.

To be more precise, the benefits of economic growth must be distributed evenly. With a big focus on the modernisation of madrasa education tinged with science bias, the country's school curriculum has to be restructured to create equal employment opportunities for all sections of young population having schooling either in a madrasa or a school. The poor who constitute more than 50 per cent of the country's 140 million people must be provided access

to educational, employment, and business opportunities in a bid to prevent them from going astray. It must be brought home to all of us entrusted with the gigantic task of planning and drawing future strategy of the country that nearly 40 per cent of the country's population is under 25 years old. These cohorts of disgruntled and disillusioned youth folk can be explosive mix blocking the little bit of reform and structural reorganisation that are taking place here and there.

What does it take to commit a violent crime like murdering a person in crowded street full of witnesses and then walk away unpunished? It is simply the ability to manipulate a creaking criminal investigation system. Plus cash, muscle power and a few political connections. At least that's what the number of high profile, unresolved cases starting from Jamaluddin abduction in Chittagong to Haji Shahidullah murder in Mirpur, Dhaka or Mirpur Commerce College student Kamrul Islam Momin murder seem to indicate. Momin's killing coming barely a month after the bizarre killing of Haji Shahidullah has heightened the cynicism about our criminal investigation machinery. Street wisdom says, even if the Motiheel Thana O.C. alleged to be linked with the Momin murder case over a property feud has been closed at the moment, he will evade punishment. Indeed, as a reputed lawyer in the country says, "Crime today is a low risk, high return business. With more than 90 per cent chance that one will not be convicted, it's no wonder that youngsters don't think twice before committing a crime."

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Banking for beggars!

MAMUN RASHID

BEGGARS, in a word, are the most vulnerable citizens of our country. Today, however, "begging" has become an easy occupation, many find it a lucrative source of income although this is not a desirable one. Also because of increasing rural-urban migration, the number of beggars in the urban areas especially in Dhaka city is going up every day as job-shy people entering into the city. It is said that the capital city of Dhaka is now home to more than 30,000 beggars as also mentioned in a survey report, with some of them being disabled.

In fact there are different kinds of beggars seen mostly begging near a mosque or a railway station, bus terminals or even at graveyards -- sometimes in a group, sometimes alone with disability. Sometimes there are many circumstantial beggars not the hardened professional ones. Survey reports by many NGOs say there are more than 300,000 circumstantial beggars in rural Bangladesh. In recent times we have also come across many child beggars in the city who often fall prey to many of the professional beggars who would engage them as their wage earners.

Because of their sheer illiteracy, ignorance and poverty, most of the poor people cannot find any other way out to support themselves or their family. Some also finds this an easy way out for maintaining livelihood, without being included in the work force. There are even beggars who are found ad-dicted to drugs and are involved in drug trafficking or other unso-called activities. There are also lots of congeni-tally or otherwise handicapped poor people in our society who would beg just for their survival.

Furthermore, often many poor people have chosen begging suffering from old age crisis who are left at the mercy of their near rela-tives or neighbours.

It was a major question cropped up in our mind: can a nation make any progress without transforming this significant number of poor people in to a productive workforce? The society cannot progress unless the poorest of the poor -- the beg-gars, are made productive mem-bers of society. However, wife of a legislator once told me- "it is impossible to transform a beggar into an active worker, begging being the easiest job".

This writer also had the same impression, before coming across a presentation on 'banking for beggars' at the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce & Industry (MCCI). There is no doubt that it was an impeccable challenge that was first taken in 2002 to support the beggars in the country by Grameen Bank founder Professor Mohammad Yunus. The Grameen Bank's new venture for the struggling members (beggars) was probably launched when Prof. Yunus had realised that while micro business can very well help the poor people it could also be used as a tool to help the poorest. It was a revolutionary initiative taken by Prof. Yunus who first announced the struggling members programme, to reach out to the beggars at the inaugural conference of the Business School's Centre for Global Business and the Economy. By launching this initiative in 2002, today Grameen Bank has started lending money to beggars at easy repayment rates, to wean them off the streets and into small scale ventures.

We -- a nation as a whole -- got to address this pressing issue "whether it is

Banking for beggars may create a huge impact in addressing poverty. It may be one of the most innovative models to reach the hardcore poor with rehabilitative, financial, educational and social services delivered through a microfinance framework.

really possible to transform Bangladesh's beggars into entrepreneurs" in order to drive out poverty by bringing the poorest to the mainstream business. To answer this question, we must review the whole scenario. If we see the success stories of microcredit it had started with a small number of poor women in very few villages, who took the advantage of micro-loans and gradually became entrepreneurs.

It was a real experience of mine when I have once interviewed a woman at Singair, Manikganj engaged in a cow-fattening project. To my utter surprise I found that the woman stood up with a very courageous answer when asked about conservative social obligations or norms that restrains most of the poor Bangladeshi women from working independently outside home. She had the courage to raise her voice against the society when she was left alone after her husband deserted her. It was the simple micro loan offered by Proshika through which she has survived and supported her family.

We might as well take the signal from many such success stories over the last few decades and how it had an extraordinary effect on the status of women in their families and communities. To some extent, beggars are a minority group who cannot often be compared with the general poor people who would prefer an honourable way of living and not live



at the charity of others. The model of banking for the beggars can help rehabilitate the beggars, create self-employment and a respectable life for the poorest but the question remains whether it is always acceptable to the beggars to choose shunning their current profession. If a professional beggar is earning more than he would be getting

by taking a loan then he might as well continue begging. So is there enough incentive for a beggar to shun begging? Or is it their illiteracy and ignorance that is the main obstacle to bring them under the shelter of an institution that may offer them a respectable source of income? Or is it their lack of confidence in their new livelihood or are coerced by

local professional beggar groups to stick to begging?

The banking for beggars with microcredit can very well attempt to rehabilitate the beggars and take them to the next stage of being productive members of the society. It can create an option of respectable life for a beggar through offering interest and collateral free flexible term microcredit, providing basic literacy and peer support to the struggling members, holding discussion programmes to harness information on the challenges to overcome and innovative solutions for creating opportunities.

The current formalised Struggling Members Programme of Grameen Bank began in July 2002, though the bank's trying to reach the beggars had been going on since its inception. Each of the Grameen Bank staff was also asked to recruit one beggar into the programme. In 2004 the goal was to reach 25,000 members. Now the programme has over 38,000 members. The programme has given out US\$350,000 in loans of which US\$150,000 have already been repaid. The struggling members have collectively saved US\$25,000. The repayment rate is 100 percent. Grameen Bank absorbs the cost to service the loans to the beggars. It also provides life insurance services at no cost to the beggars. To date, more than 380 members have quit begging and found an alternative, respectable source of self-employment.

Who are these suicide bombers after all?

SAAD S KHAN

WHILE the Iraqi politicians wrangle over the new constitution, the people around the world are looking askance at the level of violence which is being used for political ends in Iraq. From London to Bali, Iraq quagmire has become a headache for the man on the street, in the bus or under the subway, who feels insecure as long as foreign forces are in Iraq, irrespective of his own nationality or place of residence or the fact whether a contingent from his own country is in Iraq or not. The insurgents have shown the astounding capacity of striking anywhere any time, at will. The fact is that they have targeted countries that do not have a single soldier on Iraqi soil, like Pakistan, Indonesia, and more recently, Egypt. This does not, however, lend any credence to Tony Blair's harangues de-linking the connection between London attacks and his pillion riding with Bush over Iraq. Blair thinks that any such linking is an "obscurity" and that it may be--- as are a host of other obscurities that are a part of human life and society as it is.

The remarkable vibrancy of terrorist networks in Iraq proper is mind-boggling. The analysts from around the world are joining heads but failing to decipher the contours of this insurgency. Who are these men? Who trains and finances them? Where are their sanctuaries? Where do they make their bombs? Who is supporting them? How can they get away each time and why their purported leaders are enigmatic? The conventional view is that an insurgency can hardly sustain even by weeks if any of these elements is missing. Bereft of such favorable political and strategic milieu, neither the Viet Congs in Vietnam, nor the Contras in El Salvador and least of all, the Mujahideen in Afghanistan could have been expected to operate, let alone, succeed.

The utter failure in Iraq of all counter-insurgency techniques, heretofore religiously followed, warrants a major revision of textbooks on strategy. Washington, Jerusalem and administrations around the world were caught unware only for the first, or first few, times each, but gradually understood the modus operandi of the terrorists and took preemptive and security measures accordingly. And because of the vigilance, the bus riders of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv now feel as secure as the ones in Warsaw, for instance. In Iraq, with the highest post-World War concentration of troops, minus Palestine and the Indian-held Kashmir probably, the security apparatus appears helpless as the terrorists hit again and again with increasing ferocity and alarming impunity.

The estimates of the number of people killed in the ongoing civil war vary wildly from 15,000 to 150,000. Add to it the excess civilian mortality due to war and both extremes of the range stand trebled. The recent findings of the joint study of Iraq Body Count (IBC) with the Oxford Research Group puts the figure of non-combatant deaths to 25,000 since the ouster of Saddam Hussain. The US military puts its death toll to 1,700 servicemen and women while Iraq puts that of its security forces at 1,300.

The crucial and politically relevant statistics revealed by the study are that the US troops account for 37 per cent of the non-combatant deaths, compared to 9 per cent caused by the insurgents. The organized criminal mafias and ordinary thugs were responsible for another 36 per cent while 11 per cent have been attributed to "unknown agents". The remainder may owe to the Iraqi security agencies, adept at killing own compatriots since the Saddam regime, which are still believed to be behind the abduction and assassination of British-born Iraqi social worker, Margaret Hassan, last year.

The question boils down to who are the insurgents; and if they are fanatic Muslims, is it that the Iraqis had become radicalised during Saddam's secular authoritarian regime while the phenomenon could scarcely affect the Muslims of, say, Syria and Turkey? Iraq is producing suicide bombers in hundreds annually while the tally is in scores even in the ghettos of occupied Palestinian areas. There appear no known and verifiable circumstances, unique to Iraq that would explain the sheer quantum of human bombs.

The Western analysts are suggesting

century of Saddam and his playboy sons' tyranny, there are men in Iraq who would blow them up to vindicate Saddam. No, this is not the case, one only has to drop a picture of Saddam in a street in Baghdad, only to find it heaped in shit and spit, the following morning. The Iraqis are ordinary mortals with quotidian needs and desires of democracy, freedom, security and economic well being for them and their progeny, as anywhere else in Egypt or in the United Kingdom. A man sacrificing his life for Saddam is as likely to do it as an Englishman hanging himself to honour the 7/7 bombers.

group is unrealistically been trumped up by media in the West, although there is no need for these two groups to feel uncomfortable at the unpaid for publicity. With the current momentum of the war against terror, one will be surprised if either of these groups has still retained a networking of more than fifty individuals. Al Qaeda and Zarqawi group are simply brand names with franchise operations, neither commissioned nor controlled by any central authority, mushrooming all across the Muslim world. People in the Muslim world are now fed up with poverty, unemployment and the socio-political

safely assume that most of the suicide bombers might not have heard Zarqawi's name. So let us look elsewhere for the origin of these bombers.

It is now well known that Saddam Hussain had brutally suppressed his own people. During his reign, his forces massacred Kurds in the North, going to the extent of gassing the town of Halubja, exterminated whole localities of the Shiites during the Najaf uprising and eliminated countless Sunni political opponents as well. A safe guess of the number killed would be a figure of 100,000 or around. Another 400,000 people were

with corpses. The exact number of those killed on the road on that fateful day shall never be known but the myths running in Iraq suggest that of the 550,000 Iraqi troops occupying Kuwait, only 12,000 had returned alive.

The total number of those meeting a violent death in Iraq is anywhere between one to three million souls. In a traditional society like Iraq where even second cousins are considered part of the nucleus family and the whole tribe as an extended family, death of a person is treated as a personal loss by at least 40-70 people. If 'A' is killed in USA, his spouse, children, parents, a few close friends and maybe the siblings will feel loss of a family member; in Iraq that feeling will extend to cousins and neighbours as well. With a 23 million population, every living Iraqi has experienced the grief of violent or unnatural death of a loved one, five times over. Quite naturally the society has been bruised and battered by the violence and the spirit of revenge is passing through the veins of most Iraqis. Since most Iraqis considered Saddam as the US tout and even held it responsible for perpetuating the Iran-Iraq war and then obviously for the Iraqis killed in the two Gulf Wars (1991 & 2003), the hatred for America is writ large in the hearts and minds. America's new found role of liberators may help them fool themselves but not the Iraqis. It is a common jobless Iraqi who pined over a friend disappearing since Saddam era, who lost an uncle in war with Iran and a cousin on the Iraq-Basra road on Feb. 27 massacre in 1991, who saw his neighbour's daughter die of pneumonia due to medicine shortage, who has three undernourished kids to feed and two aged sisters to marry, and no job and no hope, who is killing the Americans. And this species, unfortunate for the Americans, is abundant in Iraq and probably accounts of 90 per cent of insurgent attacks. The lesson: please do not murder a person, and if you

do kindly do not try going to the deceased house masquerading as a Santa Clause.

The situation is no doubt complicated by the presence of Saudi, Yemeni and Egyptian militants who are venting their frustration over domestic political butchery by attacking the Americans in Iraq. The presence of Americans in their proximity is a God-sent opportunity to take revenge for the US support to Israel and to the regional poodle despots, or so they think. Iraq has become a rallying and galvanizing point for them and with the Iraqi law enforcement system already crumbled, these ideological fighters rule the roost outside Baghdad's Green Zone. In fact, the whole of Iraq is their sanctuary and they do not want to go to fight isolated losing battles back home. But these are less than tenth of the insurgent strength.

As for their sources of funding, there are three; first, the rich Saudi philanthropists who hate the ruling dynasty and consider it their duty to purge foreign forces from the Saudi soil; second, the leaders of Baath party in Syria whose regime survival is contingent upon an early collapse of democracy in Iraq, which may follow as soon as the Americans withdraw, and the third organized Iraqi criminal gangs and smuggling mafia.

All the factions in the violence are happy as long as the Americans and the British machinery is geared to disrupting the Al Qaeda network (that does not exist), locating Zarqawi (who may well be dead), and finding Baath supporters (where there are none). The killers are ordinary young men, fond not of Bin Laden but of movies and girls, whose future had been stolen from them by the West's support of Saddam Hussain. The research and analysis wings of the CIA and the MI6 need some overhaul!

Saad S Khan is an Oxford-published author and a widely read analyst on politics, law and governance in the Muslim world.

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two plausible sources; the diehard militants associated with Jordan-born Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi and the pro-Saddam loyalists belonging to militant wing of the Baath Party of Iraq. Both conjectures cannot stand the test of close scrutiny. The Western mind has failed to see the political situation without the tinted glassed of deeply ingrained interpretations, as if the sanctity of erroneously held assumptions is dearer than the lives of soldiers. The concept of "benevolent dictatorship" does not appear to them as misnomer, although this is as ridiculous a phrase as the "loving murderer". The West is embracing Mubarak and Karimov for the war against terror although these despots are part of the problem, not of the solution. Extending such underlying assumptions to Iraq implies that after quarter of a

Composition of Saddam's Baath party militant wings overlapped with his armed forces, the so-called Republican Guards and his son-led Fidayeen-e-Saddam [literally: lovers of Saddam]. The last category were a motley of village strong-men, urban loafers and street thugs who identified themselves with the regime to avoid confronting the law. These thugs are still there, looting buses and extorting money from shops and are responsible, as noted above, for over a third of civilian deaths. They are ideologically rudderless and have no commitment to blow themselves up, although their stakes are in the continuance of lawlessness. Occasional criminal assistance to the insurgents cannot be ruled out but this symbiosis has no ideological underpinnings. The bogey of Al Qaeda and of Zarqawi

disempowerment. The absence of legitimate democratic mechanisms of channeling or expressing dissent in the wake of domestic, workplace and State violence against them, makes people turn to terrorism. And to haunt the Americans, exacerbate the impact and to distract the law enforcement machinery, they claim responsibility as groups associated with Al Qaeda and the latter gladly owns the action. If Al Qaeda is the name of a hate ideology against the West, then every anti-Western violence is definitely Al Qaeda, but if this is the name of a certain network, then one may be rest assured that not one Iraqi casualty goes to the (dis)credit of Al Qaeda while the Zarqawi and a handful of his band are responsible for less than 200 killings. Actually since fewer than a fraction of Iraqis watches the CNN, one can

killed in the Iran-Iraq war during 1980-88 and 50,000 people might have been killed during the 2003 Gulf War and as many during the subsequent ensuing civil war. Add the wild guess of 200,000 in excess mortality in the past decade due to sanctions, chronic food and medicine shortages, and (since 2003) mismanagement by the occupation authorities and insurgency-related causes. The biggest single manslaughter took place on 26-27 February of 1991 when in the wake of defeat in the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussain ordered all his forces out of Kuwait and in a disorderly haste the Iraqi soldiers got hold of any motor vehicle and started running for their lives. In disregard of all laws, canons and customs of war, the US Air Force bombed them to death and the 120 km Kuwait Basra road was littered