

Stop "crossfire" deaths HR watch report reflects what local media has been saying all along

THE condemnation of Rab by the US-based Human Rights Watch comes as no surprise to us. We warned the government, time and again, that the crossfire deaths were undermining the edifice of the whole judicial process and whatever Rab had achieved in its anti-terrorism drive. The introduction of the crack force had a positive impact on the crime situation as proliferation of terrorist organisations was threatening law and order. The Rab's efficiency in containing the threat was commendable, but nothing could justify the deaths in crossfire, the accounts of which invariably followed the same pattern.

The anti-crime drive was expected to receive a fresh impetus when the present caretaker government took over and people also hoped that all excesses in the name of enforcing law would be eliminated. The crossfire deaths drew sharp criticism from human rights advocates both at home and abroad and the year 2007 saw a welcome decline in such deaths. But in recent months quite a few suspected criminals were reported to have been killed in crossfire, which has again raised serious concern regarding abuse of human rights by Rab.

The government can ill afford to ignore the issue, which has already sullied our image abroad. And to tell the truth, taking human lives in an unlawful manner should be viewed from not only the legal point of view or the image crisis that it might create, but also the moral perspective. It could be interpreted as a sure sign of the nation being not sensitive enough to the most fundamental right of its citizen's right to live. We have always opposed the scheme of liquidating suspected criminals unlawfully, while pointing out that such criminals, whatever be the charges against them, have the right to defend themselves in a court.

The Human Rights Watch Report has exposed the ruthlessness of Rab's way of handling suspected criminals, which has been repeatedly exposed in the local media including The Star. The government's response should be clear and loud. Such killing must be stopped at once.

Horrendous scale of spousal abuse

Gender-sensitivity must begin at home

THE recent study conducted by CPD in which it was revealed that the cost of physical healthcare related to spousal violence amounts to over 4 per cent of GDP is shocking news and should serve as a wake-up call to all of us. Indeed, the study merely puts a taka figure on an extremely serious problem that has plagued our society and gone unheeded for far too long.

The fact that the actual monetary cost of such violence is so high should give us all pause and helps to quantify the severity of the situation. However, more eye-opening even than the monetary figure are the other statistics revealed by the study, which are, in fact, far more troubling.

If 40 percent of Bangladeshi women are abused it means that 40 percent of men are abusers -- a disgraceful statistic! No less shocking is the statistic that 19 percent of the women reported serious physical violence at the hands of their spouse.

If this is the state of gender relations in the home, how can we expect to see equality of women at the societal level? The report shames all Bangladeshi men.

There can be no more pressing societal need than the equality of women and the treatment of women. In all spheres from education to healthcare to nutrition to employment women lag behind men, and this is something which we have worked hard to address as a nation.

The lesson here is that we have clearly not worked anything like hard enough and that we are still far way from where we need to be. There can be no greater evidence of the subordinate status of women than the fact that fully 40 percent of them are subject to physical violence in their own homes. If Bangladeshi men cannot treat their wives as equals and cannot understand that such behaviour is unacceptable then it shows that they have a long way to go.

Men must understand that women are their equals under the law of the land, all religious codes, and simple morality, and that spousal abuse is the most serious of crimes and is never acceptable under any circumstances. Clearly, this simple truth has escaped too many Bangladeshi men. The issue should be addressed nationally.

Preparation of voter list and NID card: A notable feat



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THERE were more doubting Thomases than those who believed that the EC would be able to meet the deadline for the preparation of a final voter list with photographs. Not everyone realises what a tremendous achievement it has been, given that we have also got our national identification (NID) card, for all those that were involved in the process, right from its conceptualisation 'till its completion. No one should grudge the EC for organising a celebratory function marking the end of the project, although it would have served the cause of politics and democracy better had the EC also included the leaders of the major political parties in its guest list.

However, some confusion regarding the matter still remains as was evident when voters turned up at the recent elections with their NID card. In fact, the EC project was entitled, "Preparation of Electoral Roll with Photographs and Facilitating the Issuance of National Identity (ID) Card." There is nothing as a voter ID card, and that the NID card has nothing to do with the voter list, and was only a spin-off of the process of voter registration. It is just as well that the government considered going for NID simultaneously, since the modalities involved for the preparation of both are the same, up to a

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Given the fairly complex actions involved in the process of registering a voter and the fact that there were more than a quarter million computer operators trained for only two weeks before being employed, mistakes are only normal. But one agrees that zero tolerance for mistakes would be the ideal situation. It goes to the credit of all concerned that a survey by a development partner during the recent elections certified the degree of accuracy of the voter list as that in any other developed country, and that no eligible voter has been left out due to procedural flaw.

stage, like basic data collection and cross checking.

There were many quarters including NGOs who had argued against going for NID since some of them were driven by the presumption that it would not be possible to complete the NID project in 18 months, and that might put the voter list project, and consequently the national election, at risk.

Putting off the NID card project for a later time would have cost much more, particularly in terms of money, than what has been spent now for both the voter list with photographs and NID. And my guess is that had the project been conducted by a foreign vendor the cost would have perhaps been many times more than what has been actually spent, not to speak of the inevitable time overrun. The EC as the sponsor and coordinating agency, and the Bangladesh armed forces should receive our ungrudging accolade for having accomplished a challenging assignment within the stipulated time and cost. In fact, the UN is thinking of replicating the model in other developing countries.

But there were some genuine apprehensions on the minds of many, and it is not that the operational agency, Bangladesh army, was not aware of it. Let me relate

some of the comments regarding the project, expressed in early 2007, which were fairly representative of the common concerns about the EC project.

The first problem that many saw was that of data gathering and data organising as there was no national database in place. Many questioned the relevance of the card to a large number of the people who were illiterate and living under poverty line. It was feared that with the current state of the copyright law, the security of ID cards might be jeopardised, with possibility of replication of the ID cards, apart from the other issues of maintenance and replacement of lost "voters ID" card. Obviously, most of the concerns stemmed from the misperception about the NID being the same as a voter ID card, which is not the case. And happily, the system evolved to prepare the two documents provides foolproof guarantees against abuse and replication.

Of course, data collection involved the greater part of the project time, including time spent on preparing a comprehensive initial registration form. The sheer magnitude of the undertaking cannot be easily comprehended unless one goes into the details of what the mechanism had involved, including the intricate logistical process of

putting the essential ingredients together -- which was an entirely separate operation by itself. Just for the record, when all the data is collected and handed over to the newly formed NIRA (National Information and Registration Agency) this would be the largest biometric database in the world.

Given the fairly complex actions involved in the process of registering a voter and the fact that there were more than a quarter million computer operators trained for only two weeks before being employed, mistakes are only normal. But one agrees that zero tolerance for mistakes would be the ideal situation. It goes to the credit of all concerned that a survey by a development partner during the recent elections certified the degree of accuracy of the voter list as that in any other developed country, and that no eligible voter has been left out due to procedural flaw.

The performance appears even more significant when one considers that a foreign vendor had quoted around Tk.1000 crore just for printing the NID only. Two facts will help put the matter in perspective.

One will recall that in 1997 a somewhat similar venture was undertaken by the then government. The plan was to prepare voter ID cards only, within a time frame of 2-3 years. The scheme



Registration workers made sure to reach everyone, even those with physical disabilities.

came to naught primarily because of the basic flaws in the operational mechanism of the plan. While there were as many as 37 vendors the data collection procedure was not only flawed, each of the vendors applied its own mechanism of data collection.

There was mismatch between pictures and names and most people did not care to turn up to the designated centers for registration. There were both "good" and "bad" vendors. While the good ones failed because of poor planning, the bad ones undertook dubious shortcuts with inevitable results. At the end of the day, Tk.115 crore was spent without a single paisa worth of output.

In 2005, an integrated project for only MRP and NID would have put us back by Tk.1400 crore -- and that too without voter list with pictures, and the project was expected to be completed in 5 years from the time of commission. The economics of the foreign vendors raise the question whether they apply alto-

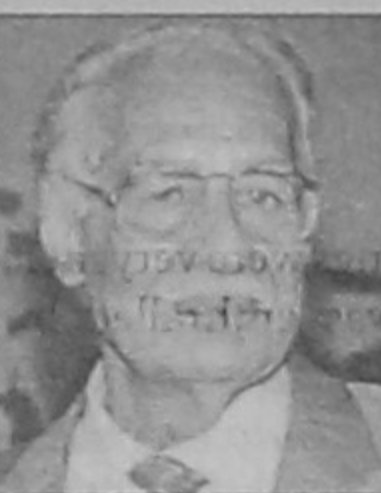
gether different criteria in their planning or deliberately inflate cost and time thinking that we would not be able to carry out the project ourselves and would have to eventually fall back on them. This is a classic example of being taken for a ride, thankfully the authorities concerned refused to go along.

The humongous task was accomplished by the armed forces led by the Bangladesh army in less than a year and with only less than one-third the cost quoted by others. One must admit that only an institution supremely confident of its capabilities could have agreed to shoulder such an onerous task.

Now that the biggest hurdle to a free and fair election has been overcome, all that we are waiting for is a peaceful and participatory Sangshad election and handover of the reins of the government to the elected representatives.

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The siege within



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

WHEN religion is mixed with politics, the result is what has happened at Srinagar and Jammu. Several people have been killed; property worth crores has been burnt, and life in both the regions has practically come to a standstill.

Leaders-turned-mobsters have pushed the allotment of 100-acre land to the Amarnath shrine management board and the cancellation to such an extent that they have polarised the entire state to the last person. The valley is separated from Jammu by the Pirpanjal mountain range, but now a wall of religious and regional jingoism has also come up.

This is not the first time that such a situation has arisen. Yet, every blow weakens the ties between the two regions and lessens the space for pluralism. Even liberal politicians in the valley are wearing religion on their sleeves. They have buried the Kashmiri, akin to Sufism, deep.

Still, the Kashmir Valley was one area in the subcontinent where no communal incident took place after the partition. Sheikh

BETWEEN THE LINES

The two regions have been going further from each other for a long time. Separatists and politicians in the Valley and Jammu have been widening the gulf to see if they could become separate states. Some straws have been in the wind in the shape of demand for autonomy for Jammu. Some Kashmiri pandits who wanted to return to their homes in the Valley have realised that there was no going back.

Mohammed Abdullah was at the helm of affairs at Srinagar.

Many Hindus and Sikhs had taken shelter there after travelling from Pakistan. Some among them felt insecure. The Sheikh arranged their transport by tongas to Jammu. However, it is a matter of shame that when the refugees reached safely on the Jammu side, the Muslim tonga drivers were butchered.

This partly explains why the all-party delegation, which went from Delhi to Jammu and Srinagar to find a solution had to come back empty-handed. Positions have hardened beyond redemption. The delegation's hope that communalism and regionalism would be ultimately defeated is mere wishful thinking. The two regions can continue to be yoked together. But they have been cut asunder; emotionally, socially and otherwise.

Yet, it would be an oversimplification of the situation if one were to conclude that the allotment of land or its cancellation was responsible for the agitation. The wounds the two regions have inflicted on each other over the years have deepened.

The land incident only provided spark to the haystack of alienation, which was there to burn.

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What is disconcerting is to see the well-read young Muslims participating in the agitation. Some of them have worked in India in important positions in the private sector. This is a message far beyond the allotment of the land. It reflects anger and desperation. It is clear that the normalcy seen at Srinagar is far from real.

Once the chips are down, practically everyone is on the streets. That religion has played a key role in consolidating the Kashmir community is something that should make the intelligentsia in

the country think that the status quo in the state cannot last indefinitely.

The BJP agenda is to bring about the separation of Jammu and Kashmir. A few liberal Kashmiris, who have contacted me, suspect such a design because of the ferocity of the Jammu agitation. The BJP has already created a situation where it is difficult to imagine that the two regions can ever be united.

Remarks made by leaders of political parties in the Valley reflect a particular thinking. The Amarnath pilgrims' huts were compared to the Jewish settlements in Palestine. Some said the land allotment was meant to change the demography, to turn the Muslim majority state into a Hindu one.

This allegation is not true because New Delhi, even under the BJP-led government, has never tried to put Hindus from other states into Kashmir. The law prohibits non-Kashmiris from purchasing land in the state. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was categorical in his pronouncement that no outsider would be allowed to settle

down in the state.

I can understand the BJP exploiting the situation for its Hindutva ends because it has no faith in India's ethos of secularism. But I have been greatly disappointed to find the Hurriyat leaders and the Mufti People's Democratic Party vying with the fundamentalists, to outdo them.

It is well known that Mehbooba Mufti talks irresponsibly for the sake of effect. But this time she has beaten all records. Her observations on a channel TV reminded me of a jihadi who did not mind setting Kashmir on fire so long as she got applause from the fanatics of the community.

When religious frenzy takes over, people do not think straight. India's politics is going to get more vitiated because of the coming elections. The central government is on its last legs, and probably a long-term solution of Kashmir is not possible.

But some exercise should begin. The Valley, Jammu and Ladakh, should become a federation so that each unit feels that it has an identity of its own. The overall solution of the Kashmir problem should follow.

The idea of blocking the Jammu-Srinagar road, the only land link between the two regions, was that of RSS, the BJP's mentor. Thousands of karsevaks were brought from the different states to sustain the road blockade.

It is another matter that the army was able to pierce through the blockade and sustain supply of essential goods to the Valley. For

some reasons, the inept government at Srinagar, and still more inept at Delhi, did not think of measures to keep the road open from the day one.

The threat of Kashmir fruit growers to cross the Muzaffarabad border to take their produce to Pakistan should have made the RSS realise the repercussion of its bandhs and blockades. Instead, the BJP threatened Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal that it would withdraw its support to his government if he did not stop trucks moving to Kashmir.

Correctly, he did not yield to the threat. Still two BJP ministers in his cabinet were able to disrupt the supply for some time.

The government once again woke up to threats of going across to Muzaffarabad. When people took to the streets, the police action began. The protest was bound to spread to other places because, after a long time, people had a chance to ventilate their age-old grievances.

It is a bigger question of Kashmir, which has unfortunately been reopened on religion lines.

The whole situation has a lesson for New Delhi. Having opposed the two-nation theory, India has a point that the Hindu majority Jammu and the Muslim majority Kashmir cannot be separated because it will tell upon India's secular polity. However, after the recent happenings in the Valley and Jammu, the whole thing becomes a question mark.

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'Sinful Saakashvili' or hero?

After the Georgian army retreated from Gori to the medieval citadel of Mtskheta, about 25 miles away from the capital, Saakashvili told the nation on television Monday night that the Russians "are coming ... Mtskheta is our last position to defend the capital." His words created panic all across Tbilisi.

ANNA NEMTSOVA

ONE of the more lingering images from the Georgia crisis may be footage of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's bodyguards throwing him to the ground and covering him with flak jackets as a Russian jet zoomed above. Witnessed by journalists from Newsweek and other outlets on Monday morning in Gori, the incident signified the seeming powerlessness of Georgia in the face of Russian military might.

Saakashvili was in Gori, a city of about 35,000 people 45 miles from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, to inspect ruined buildings; their facades scorched black, their win-

dows blown out and their balconies shredded.

In one of the burnt-out cars on the street, a pregnant woman and her husband had been killed by a bomb just hours before. He brought along French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who told reporters that he had come to show the world "a strong picture" of what happened to a few blocks of a city in a sovereign country.

Saakashvili was angry. When asked how the war with Russia could be stopped, he snapped: "Ask our neighbours!" The next moment, the low roar of that jet caused a panic. One of Saakashvili's bodyguards, a stout man with a camouflage scarf around his head, screamed and

pointed at the sky. "Khairy, Khairy!" he shouted. "The air! The air!"

Kouchner, who unlike the Georgian president was not wearing a flak jacket, was already in his car, leaving the street at top speed. When the jet was gone, the president was rushed to his car and driven away. Saakashvili's Hummer made such sharp turns that it seemed in danger of turning over.

Not all the locals were impressed by the president's visit. A block away, two middle-aged women were crying by their ruined house. "What is he here for?" they said of Saakashvili. "What is he worth now? Can he give us our houses back?"

News of the Russian Army's rapid advance Monday came by radio and text message: Russian

tanks are in Poti, said the Georgian government; they drove through Zugdidi to the military base in Senaki, according to a reporter who saw tanks and spoke to Russian soldiers; they have taken Brotskheti, the third village past the former South Ossetian border on the way to Gori, a NEWSWEEK colleague reported.

Meanwhile, Russian television carried Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov's statement that Russian forces were taking control only of the "conflict zones" in Georgia, with no designs on the country as a whole. Do not worry, he said, his message addressed to the West and heavy with irony. "We are not going to destroy your beacon of democracy."

At exactly the same time, Russian aviation was bombing the outskirts of Gori. Photographer Don Weber was close enough to feel the hot blast burning his skin.

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away from the capital, Saakashvili told the nation on television Monday night that the Russians "are coming ... Mtskheta is our last position to defend the capital." His words created panic all across Tbilisi.

Across the street from the parliament building on Rustaveli Prospect, the central street of Tbilisi, a man was sitting on the pavement in tears as his 2-year-old son hugged his father's head.

Gocha Kalichava, 29, said he lost his wife Sofika, his mother Lyudmila and baby son Edik in the Russian bombings of Gori. "I do not care what commands Putin gives," he cried. "Why did our president go on the attack?" he asked referring to Saakashvili's initial move on South Ossetia last week. "Russia has won wars for centuries. Did [Saakashvili] think they could survive attacks? He must have been out of his mind!"

Maria Shishianishvili was selling cola on the side of the road on the

same street. "Let the Russians come as soon as they can and bring down this sinful Saakashvili!" she fumed. "We'll welcome them."

The scene was admittedly different in Tbilisi on Tuesday evening when thousands of flag-waving Georgians turned out to hear a defiant Saakashvili address the crowd. "I saw Russian planes bombing our villages and killing our soldiers, but I could not do anything, and this will always be with me," he said. "I promise that I will make them regret this."

Saakashvili was joined on stage by the leaders of five countries who have also had problems with their Russian neighbour: Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

But Lyudmila Agishvili, 60, has witnessed revolutions and thousands of protestors marching by her window. "We have already experienced Russian tanks on Rustaveli," she said, remembering April 9, 1989, when Soviet tanks dispersed independence demon-

strators.

Agishvili said that she panics when she imagines that tonight or tomorrow Russian tanks could be driving on her street again. "It has been awfully scary. When the presi-

dent ordered to attack Tskhinvali [the capital of South Ossetia], we knew then we were doomed. How come he didn't realise that?"

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What can I do?