

Slide in law and order

We welcome the acknowledgement, effective action awaited

THE most common index of a government's efficiency is the state of law and order in the country. It needs hardly be said that there has been a marked increase in criminal and anti-social activities of late. We must, however, commend the Minister for Home for acknowledging this fact.

Her frank admission is quite a departure from an attitude of going into a denial mode whenever it came to the question of government responsibility towards citizens' safety and security. We feel that there is need for the government to examine the reason for the slide and take tangible and effective steps to arrest the dip.

We have, regrettably, noticed a tendency on the part of many high ups in the government to indulge in comparisons of the situation now with that of the time immediately after the 4-Party alliance had taken over. Such comparisons are odious since nobody should take comfort in the fact that there might have been fewer deaths or other forms of violence in a particular period compared to another. Why should bad acts be replicated, particularly when change is the catchword on which AL came to power?

Now that the Upazilla elections are over, and indeed the police had to be deployed thinly all over the country, a situation which the criminals might have exploited, there can be no excuse for not going after them and bringing them to book. We note that a special operation is underway in the capital which we feel should be expanded to include the entire country.

We would like to point to another cause of apprehension in the minds of the common man that stems from the news reports that many criminals and miscreants, who had taken shelter across the border during the emergency, are now feeling it expedient to resurface at home taking advantage of the return of a political government. Reportedly, a large number of these identify themselves with one political party or the other. It needs hardly be said that the administration should be absolutely non-partisan in going after the criminals, and in this regard we would like to recall oft-repeated comment of the minister and her deputy that criminals belong to no party.

There is another cause for worry that cannot be brushed aside which is the government's decision to withdraw cases instituted against the AL workers by the erstwhile BNP-Jamaat government, reportedly numbering nearly 100,000, on the grounds that these have been politically motivated. And there is also a talk of restarting cases in which final reports have been submitted. There may be merit in both the moves, but the government must deal with both in a manner so that no partisan motive can be imputed to its action.

Preserving both heritage and lives

Govt intervention needed in public interest

ONCE again the collapse of a part of a building in the Shankharibazar locality of Old Dhaka has brought into the news the twin issues of the preservation of our cultural heritage as well as the government's duty to ensure that city dwellers can be safe in their homes.

Both issues, safety and heritage, need to be addressed at once, and both issues have been neglected by the authorities for far too long. We hope that it will not require any further incidents for the government to address the issue.

It seems to us that the first order of the day must be to take a survey of the heritage localities to ensure that we have the latest information at hand. Even if such surveys have been carried out in the past, there can be little doubt that they need to be updated, indeed that this kind of information gathering and analysis process should be a continuing one.

The survey should seek to determine which buildings are beyond repair and which are salvageable. That seems to us to be the primary question. The ones that are beyond repair and are a danger to health and safety must come down before disaster strikes. In cases where the building in question is a genuine heritage site perhaps thought might be given to preserving it, but not as a dwelling.

For the buildings that are viable, they need to be divided into heritage sites and ones that are not of any particular historical significance. The ones that fall into the latter category can be left to the judgment of the owners. The ones that are bona fide heritage sites should be preserved.

At all times the authorities need to consult and listen to the opinions of the homeowners and dwellers. Where buildings are required to be torn down for safety considerations, it goes without saying that compensation must be awarded to those affected.

Similarly for those that ought not to be torn down for reasons of heritage preservation, it is also appropriate to come up with some kind of compensatory scheme for the owners.

The key to the success of the process is full information and full consultation with the affected community. The government ought to take pro-active steps in this matter before it is too late.

A zero kill year

This time the AL leadership should go one step further. It should openly take up the challenge of improving on its 1998 record. Tell us loudly this will be a zero kill year, that there will be no more extra-judicial killings in Bangladesh. For one killing is still one life too many to lose.

JALAL ALAMGIR

NOW that an elected government is in power, we want to be assured that the most basic of our rights -- the right to life -- will be respected.

Too many lives are lost to political violence in Bangladesh every year. People die in brawls with bamboo sticks. Deadly ambushes on activists are common. Thugs armed with machetes and daggers sweep down on political foes routinely.

All sorts of modern weaponry have been added to the fights: pistols, revolvers, semi-automatics, plastic explosives, and even military-grade grenades.

The madness has been so frequent that we are almost immune to it. But the numbers are staggering. Between 2001 and 2006, at least 1,300 people died from political violence. More than 35,000 were injured.

Now I don't dream naively that all this will disappear overnight. But I do think we can make significant progress in two areas quickly.

The first is our leadership's commitment to political justice. The main reason that the worst atrocities took place during BNP-Jamaat's reign was that the perpetrators were protected. They were not only sheltered, but were also encouraged, financed, and armed.

The August 21 bombings remain unsolved. The murder of S.A.M.S. Kibria remains unsolved. Investigation of the fiery demise of Nurul Islam and his son is being sidetracked. And if attacks on leaders remain unsolved, the kin of everyday activists can harbour little hope of ever getting justice.

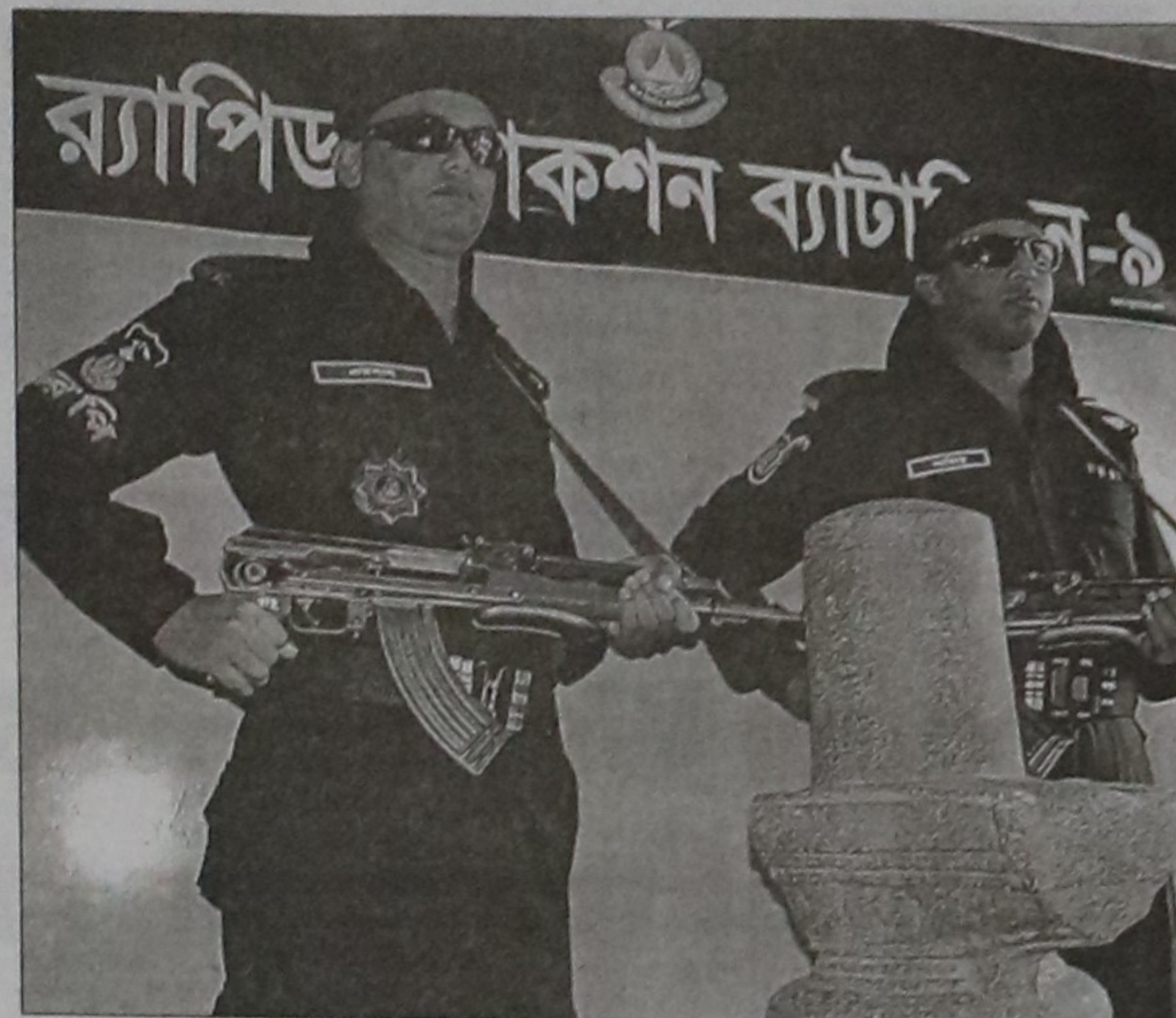
This culture of immunity was bolstered in 1975, when the assassins of the Sheikh Mujib family and killers of the four national leaders were rewarded for carrying out the crimes. It reached another level between 2001 and 2006, when mass terror, targeting hundreds at a time, began to be authorised.

Denied a fair dealing, the victims resort to seeking justice the vigilante way, and the cycle accelerates nationwide. Before we know it, hundreds are added to the roster of the dead.

Those who think that this is simply our political fate are incorrect. Research on violence shows that early and decisive intervention can stop such cycles. A political commitment to stop violence and pursue the perpetrators can reduce the deadly roster fairly quickly. AL activists, who suffered during the past seven years, will be prone to taking matters in their own hands. But the leadership needs to chain this urge firmly through the legal institutions.

The second area is one in which the target should not be just reduction, but eradication. Extra-judicial killings must stop, completely. Most of the killings by the police and the paramilitary are not accidents, but deliberate. These are the worst offenses, for they constitute a violation of the right to life by the very agents entrusted to protect it. And in their wake, these killings leave institutions of justice in shambles because the perpetrators almost never have to account for themselves.

Under the 2007-2008 caretaker government, 319 people were killed extra-judicially. According to investigation by Human Rights Watch, "a large proportion of these killings are in fact extra-judicial executions carried out after the victim had



Let there be no more crossfire killings.

been taken into custody."

Woeful though this record is, it was even worse during the BNP-Jamaat regime, during which more than a thousand lives were lost to extra-judicial killings. In 2002, Operation Clean Heart, BNP's campaign to recover illegal arms, gave these killings a boost. The creation of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) gave it another boost in 2003. In 2005 alone, a record 400 people were killed by government agents.

With this type of performance in our history, can we seriously hope for a zero kill year? We can, for we have a precedent; it was almost achieved before.

It may seem astonishing now, but in 1998 Bangladesh had only one extra-judicial killing. We had only two and three the year before and the year after.

The crucial difference between the recent past and the distant past was in political commitment.

With Awami League back in power, we have good reason to be hopeful about human rights. In its election manifesto, AL has promised to stop extra-judicial killings. But it won't be easy to rein back the security forces who, over the last seven years, have honed their aptitude for abusing power. AL's leadership must send the message clearly that these killings will not be tolerated, and it must prosecute any offense fully.

And this time the AL leadership should go one step further. It should openly take up the challenge of improving on its 1998 record. Tell us loudly this will be a zero kill year, that there will be no more extra-judicial killings in Bangladesh. For one killing is still one life too many to lose.

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The public faces of power

There is an "if" hanging over every destiny, which is what makes Indian democracy the most fascinating exercise in international politics. No election is a mirror of the other. The mood needs to shift only marginally to create new configurations in the kaleidoscope.

M.J. AKBAR

DR. Manmohan Singh is the Abdul Kalam of politics: both are admired among the middle classes for decency, integrity, education, and achievement in their preferred discipline. Sometimes it takes a tragedy like ill health to evoke emotion, and the response in the urban areas to the prime minister's hospitalisation must have come as a bit of shock to the Congress Party, which had convinced itself that Sonia Gandhi was its only mass leader and Rahul Gandhi the only possible heir. Dr. Singh today is far more popular than the Congress president among the middle class.

But this popularity is hedged with a problem: there is what might be called insufficient ownership of their identity among voters. Christians do identify with Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, but in demographic terms they are too small and too thinly spread. Dr. Singh has never been a conventional politician from Punjab, while Muslims do not really think of Dr. Kalam

as one of their own. But they are icons of an emerging, non-sectarian India that will come into its own, electorally, five or ten years later.

Their support is largely among the young. It is a foolish notion that youth only wants youth. The young want someone who can offer a future. Age is incidental, neither an asset nor a liability. Both Dr. Singh and Dr. Kalam are in their 70s. Ability, backed up by a successful track record, is essential. Tomorrow's electorate will vote on merit, not reservation.

That is going to be a problem for the Congress, which cannot think outside hereditary reservation when it comes to a post-Manmohan prime minister. On the eve of going to hospital Dr. Singh nominated his senior-most colleague in the cabinet, Pranab Mukherjee, as the person who would stand in for him during the crucial hours under anaesthesia and for the period of his convalescence.

It seems that Sonia Gandhi was unable to live with the minimalist necessity of

Mukherjee becoming the public face of government at the Republic Day parade and functions. This would mean sending a signal that Mukherjee was the natural successor to Dr. Singh. Instructions were amended and the public face of power was distributed into a Picasso duality.

Defence Minister A.K. Antony was given the high-profile presence at the Republic Day parade. He had one specific virtue. He is not a declared player in the prime minister stakes, a race that will open the moment the results of this year's general elections are announced. Pranab Mukherjee, on the other hand, is going to be an enthusiastic participant.

Dr. Singh was not playing favourites when he named Mukherjee to stand in for him. Mukherjee has carried this government through some difficult challenges in the past four years. The Left wanted him as president instead of Pratibha Patil. He wanted the job as well. But Sonia Gandhi rejected the proposal.

Dr. Singh's medical condition is a clear setback for the Congress, and will prevent him from campaigning vigorously. This is an election for his job. The Congress, and the UPA, might need to offer a number two even if the number one remains in place. Rahul Gandhi has not acquired the gravitas necessary for the job, and those with gravitas do not seem acceptable to Sonia Gandhi because they would be a threat to her son's ambitions. Sharad Pawar, for instance, has already indicated that there

is no reason why he cannot lead the alliance.

If Dr. Singh is the Kalam of politics, can Kalam become the Manmohan Singh of the future? The thought must have occurred to someone. There is already talk that if the verdict of this year's general election is fractured, then someone like Kalam could be offered leadership of a national government. This is probably far-fetched, but stranger things have happened. Who expected Dr. Singh to become prime minister?

On a more realistic note, the Kalam projection is an over-stretch. The NDA has the advantage of clarity on who would be prime minister if it got the numbers, which is L.K. Advani. There is an "if" hanging over every destiny, which is what makes Indian democracy the most fascinating exercise in international politics. No election is a mirror of the other.

The mood needs to shift only marginally to create new configurations in the kaleidoscope. Aspirations might solidify into ambition if a regional party does exceptionally well, and the BJP underperforms. In Bihar, Nitish Kumar might even woo the Muslim voter by implying that if he gets enough seats, he could be the NDA nominee for prime minister.

The field is open until the home stretch, when the numbers will tell us which horse is the winner.

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TIFA and software piracy

Massive violations of IPR generally do not persist forever. At some point, the US government gets involved, and forces a change. That is the change that TIFA is likely to bring. The question is whether or not we will prepare ourselves to deal with it.

ZEESHAN HASAN

ALL the papers have reported the renewed talk between Bangladesh and the US regarding a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). But what does this mean for us? Well, there are many implications, which could be very costly, but I am going to talk about only one, namely, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) on software. It is essential that we enter into such agreements with our eyes open and an awareness of what costs they will entail for Bangladesh.

Integral to TIFA is the idea that Bangladesh respects the IPR of US companies. That means that all the pirated DVDs of movies and software now available will be eliminated. The US govern-

ment will ask Bangladesh to stop piracy, and Bangladesh will have to ask the police to take action. Otherwise, Bangladesh will be subject to whatever trade penalties the US is able to impose under TIFA.

Are we seriously going to endanger billions of dollars of garments exports for the sake of pirated DVDs? I think not. Piracy will end. With respect to movies, it will be back to the 80s, with neighborhood video rental shops stocking original DVDs. With respect to software, each copy of Microsoft software could cost us thousands of takas.

What is the alternative? A search on the internet will reveal that many governments have decided to promote free software to stop piracy. Even the US government is finding that Microsoft is

too expensive. Barack Obama's first IT-related action was to appoint Scott McNealy, the founder of Sun Microsystems, to advise him on how to save the government money by using free software. Sun is relevant because it sponsors the OpenOffice free office software project, and the easiest way to save money is for governments to switch from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice.

The experience from around the world is that this is an easy transition to make. OpenOffice can read Microsoft Word documents and Excel spreadsheets, and the OpenOffice user interface is almost a clone of Microsoft Office. OpenOffice has a Windows version, which can be downloaded for free, and can immediately replace pirated copies of Microsoft Office on every PC in the country. Even the popular Bangla typing solutions like Bijoy and Avro work in OpenOffice on Windows.

Although moving from Microsoft Office to OpenOffice will save us a lot of money, we'll still face a stiff bill for Microsoft Windows. The only way to avoid this is to switch to the Linux operat-

ing system. This is actually very feasible for government and business users; Linux works fine with the laser printers that most of them use. There is even a free Bijoy-like Bangla typing solution available for Linux.

The people who will be in trouble will be the millions of home users who use cheaper inkjet printers and other devices like mp3 players, for which software is often only available on Windows. These people will have to decide if their hardware is worth the thousands of takas that MS Windows will cost them, and pay up.

Almost everyone has accepted software piracy as a fact of life in Bangladesh. More than anything else, this only shows that our governments have been short-sighted in this matter. Massive violations of IPR generally do not persist forever. At some point, the US government gets involved, and forces a change. That is the change that TIFA is likely to bring. The question is whether or not we will prepare ourselves to deal with it.

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