

BDR revolt

This should never have happened

WE unequivocally and in the strongest possible terms condemn the action taken by a section of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) jawans in rebelling against the chain of command and taking up arms against both their senior officers and the Bangladesh armed forces.

For those in the service of the republic, such actions can never be justified, no matter what the grievance, real or imagined. It is utterly intolerable that the actions of the rebelling jawans have caused the death of two officers and led to civilian casualties as well.

There are many non-combatants, including children, inside the BDR headquarters compound, whose lives were endangered by the fire-fight, and the residents of the surrounding areas in Dhaka city have had to suffer through an ordeal that no ordinary citizen should ever have to face.

We are glad that, following direct negotiation with the prime minister, the situation appears to have been to a large extent resolved, and that some semblance of normalcy is returning. We welcome the end of the stand-off and the fact that civilians are no longer in harm's way.

However, now that the initial uncertainty is over, the time has come to answer the many troubling questions that have been raised by the incident.

First, we are aghast at the magnitude of the intelligence failure. It is astounding that the very venue where the prime minister appeared not 24 hours previously could be the site of an hours-long armed rebellion with no prior intelligence as to the matter.

Let us also now take the time to address the long-standing grievances that apparently triggered the revolt. The grievances revolve around the jawans' service conditions and the fact that it is not possible to rise through the ranks to officer level; all BDR officers are seconded from the army.

There is no question that these issues need to be reviewed and we would like a high-powered body, possibly a commission, to look into it. It is regrettable that such a review was never carried out before, even though the demands are not new.

But, in the final analysis, the rebelling jawans must understand that this kind of violent and undisciplined action can never be acceptable. There can be no excuse for violating the chain of command and unleashing violence, greatly damaging the prestige of a respected institution that guards our border.

Safety net programmes for the ultra-poor

Effectiveness hinges on corruption-free implementation

EXPERTS agree on the point that spiraling prices of essentials over the last few years have pushed 40 lakh people into poverty trap adding those many to the 36 percent hardcore poor already languishing under the poverty line. Against this background, little wonder, therefore, that the government has decided to cast the safety net wider through test relief (TR), food for work programme (FWP), and targeted OMS operations at affordable prices. These will add to the VGD and VGF programmes already in operation.

The projected expansion in safety net programmes brings up a couple of issues concerning implementation of such schemes in a way that provides food security to the needy multitudes. The first relates to putting in place distribution channels devoid of middlemen, so that only the deserving can access the benefits. Secondly, the implementation ought to be corruption-free in that those in charge often choose their favourites and party loyalists to be the beneficiaries of the programmes for the most part.

A study presented at a seminar on "Basic Social Security System as part of social protection: The case of Bangladesh", organised by Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS) at IDB Bhaban on Tuesday revealed that the poorest are 'often deprived as nepotism and political affiliation frequently determine the selection procedure for the underprivileged'. Thus, we fully endorse the suggestion aired by most speakers at the seminar that a special team of Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) be assigned to monitor the safety programmes.

The government should take all precautions lest the safety net programmes, being launched to stand by the side of the ultra-poor in their hour of need, are not tainted by partisanship in any form or shape. To ensure this, the elected representatives of local bodies should involve the wider community in the matter of drawing up lists of beneficiaries strictly in accordance with objective need assessments and realities on the ground.

Aside from tasking the ACC with monitoring responsibility, another very cogent suggestion has been put forward by human rights activist Sultana Kamal who very cogently thought that the RTI could be pressed into service to sensitise the poor about their right to food security and obtain it. We think the RTI should be operationalised sooner than later.

Fairer political representation

All these problems can be resolved by conducting the election of MPs through proportional representation within multi-seat electorates based on the current districts rather than upazilas. Since the electorate would belong to the district, MPs would not feel the need to interfere with the activities of elected governments in the upazilas and unions.

AHMED A. AZAD

THE two recent elections were very important milestones in the establishment of democracy in Bangladesh. The parliamentary election was almost flawless, mainly due to the voter list with photo identification and the strict maintenance of law and order. Over 80% of the electorate, including unprecedented numbers of female and first time voters, cast their votes.

The Upazila Parishad elections, not as flawless, were nevertheless of great significance as this was the first UP elections since the restoration of democracy in 1991. Although money still played a big role in the selection and election process, the elections were fairer than ever before. But do the results fairly represent the wishes of the electorate, and can the electoral process be made more representative and effective?

The "first past the post" system cannot truly reflect the wishes of the electorate. In the 2001 election, the Awami League received over 40% of the votes and 20% of the seats. In the recent election, BNP received 33% of the votes and only 10% of the seats. Conversely, the winners in both elections ended up with over 66% of the seats. Such majorities in the past have spelled doom for the ruling parties and caused immense misery to the nation.

A vibrant and fully operational local government system is essential for regional development in Bangladesh. This should be implemented through the upazilas and union parishads. However, unless the roles

of MPs and UP chairmen are unambiguously demarcated there is potential for confrontation, especially if the MPs are allowed to have electoral offices in the upazilas.

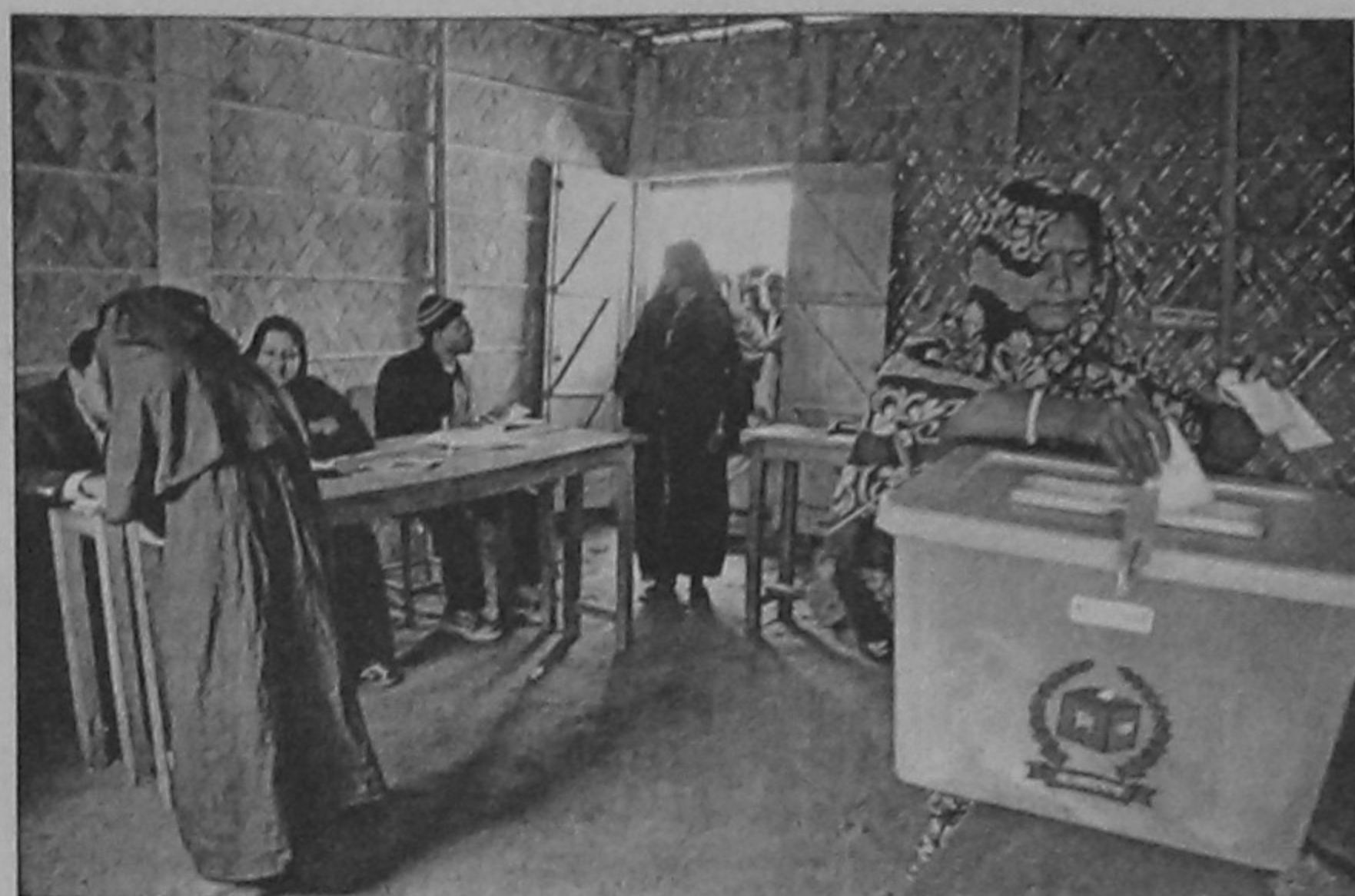
From the proceedings in parliament it appears that most MPs are unaware that regional development is not their responsibility but that of regional governments. Under the current system, voters within specific upazilas elect MPs, and they feel compelled to assume responsibility for the development of the upazilas so as not to lose electoral support. This essentially negates the role of local governments.

All these problems can be resolved by conducting the election of MPs through proportional representation within multi-seat electorates based on the current districts rather than upazilas. Since the electorate would belong to the district, MPs would not feel the need to interfere with the activities of elected governments in the upazilas and unions.

The MPs could be provided electoral offices in the district HQ, and could be included as members of District Councils together with UP chairmen and vice-chairmen so that all of them could be involved in policy development and in the assessment of progress at the regional level.

Proportional representation would also banish brute majorities in parliament and perhaps allow the election of talented MPs from outside the two major alliances. They could provide much needed alternate views in parliament.

An unprecedented number of women voted in the recent parliamentary election.



Has the time come for proportional representation?

Females constitute 51% of the electorate but a very small number of women received nomination. In spite of this, 19 women defeated their male adversaries in direct competition; the numbers could have been much higher if more women had been nominated.

It's not fair that, being more than half of the population; women should occupy less than 15% of the contested seats in parliament. Laws need to be enacted so that in the next election each political party must nominate at least 30% women as candidates.

There are 45 additional seats reserved for women, who will owe their position to the goodwill of their mainly male colleagues. This is not only demeaning to these ladies but the fact that they did not have to seek the approval of the electorate means that they will have a de facto status inferior to their directly elected female colleagues.

It's perhaps necessary to maintain reserved seats for women, and also increase their number, for the next two or three parliaments. However, from the next election onwards, one or more reserved seats could be allocated to each district and the elector-

ate of that district could directly elect women candidates for the reserved seats.

The realisation of a "Digital Bangladesh" requires technology oriented parliamentary standing committees with scientists and technologists as members. Since such expertise is not available among the membership of the current parliament it is necessary to induct specialists into the relevant parliamentary standing committees and think-tanks.

The national parliament should preferably also have representation from those segments of society that make the biggest contribution to our foreign exchange earnings, such as the RMG workers and the six million NRBs who, at the moment, do not even have the right to vote.

In the national interest, and indeed in the interest of the two major parties also, alternate modes of democratic representation need to be discussed and debated in parliament and within the wider community so that a fairer system can be adopted.

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A dangerous precedent?

Let us hope and pray that the incident of the UN interference remains an incident to promote the political culture and wisdom of our politicians, and does not turn out to be a precedent for the future.

M. SHAH ALAM

THIS write-up is in response to the article titled "A Dangerous Precedent" by Shahedul Anam Khan published in The Daily Star on February 19. Mr. Khan made some critical observations on certain sensitive issues stated in the army chief's biographical book. The issues brought forth in the book and the observations made by Mr. Khan touch on the fundamental principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state under international law and relations.

Mr. Khan's observations cover three important issues: whether an incumbent in a high office should have come with such information on politically sensitive issues; disclosing the circumstances, facts and forms of the alleged UN interference in the internal affairs of Bangladesh; and legality of interference.

First, I agree with Mr. Khan that it was rather unusual for a sitting army chief to describe the facts of the political events leading to 1/11 when he himself was one of the major actors, if not the main actor. Others involved in or witnessing the events may have a different version. Maybe the author of the book will later face "the flak and riposte."

I believe that the CAS was not unaware of

the risks involved in disclosing what he did. Perhaps he is prepared for his defence. Maybe he relied on honesty of account and purpose, principle of transparency, and the belief that he was not causing any damage to the nation by the disclosures.

After our independence, especially since 1975, many stories have remained untold. Their disclosures, I believe, would add to the nation gaining in maturity and help in nation-building. The book could even contribute to ending the secretive and controversial ways power politics is played, where the armed forces are silent but agile and active witnesses.

Second, Mr. Khan wrote: "He has done the people and the country a great favour by letting us in on many unknown facts, particularly on the manner in which threats and intimidation were brought to bear on a national institution like the armed forces by outside agencies." However, the way the CAS has presented the matter cannot be fully praised.

The UN position may have influenced the army's decision in many ways, including "rent and revenue" factor. But emphasising that income from the UN peace-keeping missions was very important for the service personnel in view of their very limited earnings, and depriving them of this would likely

create problems of discipline and administration in the army (p. 333 of the book), was a bit surprising. It is too honest an admission by the army chief!

Third, the question is whether or not the UN position was interference in the internal affairs of a state. Article 2(7) of the UN Charter prohibits UN interference "in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state."

In a globalised world where common problems are multiplying, where the traditional notion of absolute state sovereignty is outliving itself, and where ICT is rendering the state border concept irrelevant in many respects, it is not easy to find the borderline of the matters falling essentially within domestic jurisdiction. Human rights, environment, drugs and narcotics, human trafficking, and even natural calamities are no more issues of domestic jurisdiction only.

Seen in the above context, domestic misuse, dictatorship, and political anarchy with their human rights consequences cannot be outside the concern of other states, not certainly of the UN. Rather, it is becoming a legitimate expectation, if intervention or interference be at all necessary, that it does not come from any state but from the collective authority of the UN. 1/11 was unique not only in Bangladesh, but in the whole world. The world community's concern was conveyed to us in many ways.

Interestingly, the developed democracies and the UN were supportive of the army's role in some form in breaking the pre-1/11 impasse, whereas events in the last several years where the UN played a role in similar cases, typically show just the opposite. The UN record of not sympathising with army

interference, rather its opposition to it, is well known. In Bangladesh, just the opposite happened.

The reason can be found in the last paragraph of Mr. Khan's article: "Let there be no doubt that the postponement of the 2007 election was a good thing for the country, and one that had been welcomed by most."

The UN looked more at the possible consequences of the impasse, and took a pragmatic position. The mode of communicating the UN message was unique, and defied accepted norms. Unfortunately, in the pre-1/11 situation, all civil agencies and institutions of the country had become inoperative. There seemed to be no other way of meaningfully and effectively communicating the message than the one opted for by the UN.

The core issue is the creation of the pre-1/11 situation, which compelled the UN and others to take such a position. Outside interference, whether by any state or by the UN, is never desirable. But we had welcomed the outcome of the interference. Had we not? Only now we know the story behind it.

Repetition of what had happened is, of course, not desirable. Mr. Khan has expressed genuine anxiety that "given the political wisdom of our politicians," a repetition may take place. Let us hope and pray that the incident of the UN interference remains an incident to promote the political culture and wisdom of our politicians, and does not turn out to be a precedent for the future.

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Baghdad's red carpet

In April 2003, looters ransacked the facility, making off with thousands of irreplaceable artifacts from a collection that dated back six millennia, encompassing the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. The thieves soon spirited the artifacts to other countries, notably Jordan, Syria and the United States.

LENNOX SAMUELS and SAAD AL-ZIZI

BAGHDAD unfurled its own red carpet Monday for a cultural event as significant for Iraq as the Oscars were for Hollywood. In the place of movie stars were politicians, business tycoons and other Iraqi VIPs on hand for the reopening of the Iraq National Museum, six years after it closed amid fierce fighting that marked the American military's push into the capital. A half-mile-long queue of vehicles clogged the roads, negotiating security checkpoints as well as police officers on hand to make sure no harm befell Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and other dignitaries. "All streets leading to Allawi [district] are shut down; turn back!" a policeman barked through his loudspeaker.

When the U.S. military first invaded Iraq's capital, it decided to tread carefully around the museum, aware of its trove of priceless, centuries-old artifacts. But the insurgents

had other ideas and fired on the invaders from the museum's rooftop, drawing return fire that seriously damaged the building. In April 2003, looters ransacked the facility, making off with thousands of irreplaceable artifacts from a collection that dated back six millennia, encompassing the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. The thieves soon spirited the artifacts to other countries, notably Jordan, Syria and the United States.

On Monday, officials proudly put on display 6,000 pieces that had been recovered from among the more than 15,000 items taken from the museum. The works were displayed in seven of 23 exhibit rooms, including the Assyrian and Islamic halls, which were reconstituted with the help of Italian art experts. "We do not want only to be proud of our past, but we want also to be partners and active participants in the human civilisation," Maliki told the crowd.

"Opening this museum is a stage at which we stop to derive morals and lessons, the first being that... [Iraq] is not a nation without roots."

Maliki, who also toured the facility, praised the broad campaign to recover his country's stolen treasures, thanking all those countries that helped in the effort. Since 2003, the United States has partnered with Iraq on efforts such as the Iraq Cultural Heritage Project, a \$14 million program to make improvements at the museum, establish a conservation institute and provide training for Iraqi archaeologists and museum specialists. The U.S. also returned more than 1,000 recovered artifacts to the Iraqi Embassy in Washington that are being repatriated. "Iraq's cultural heritage is a gift to the cultural heritage of mankind and we are delighted to assist in its preservation," said a U.S. official in Baghdad.

Two weeks ago a group of Iraqi archaeologists and anthropologists asked Maliki not to reopen the museum "prematurely," insisting that it needed more time for various significant pieces to be properly evaluated, catalogued and stored. Maliki rejected the request and at the reopening said the museum should become a leading center for research into human civilisation. "We want the Iraqi museum to be in the lead of

world museums," he declared.

Iraq's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities launched the rebuilding effort in 2006. Only a third of the damaged works have been restored, said Abdul Zahra al-Talqani, ministry spokesman. Although thousands of works were ripped off -- some apparently by or with the collusion of museum staff -- many of the most important pieces were saved because they had been locked away in vaults at Iraq's Central Bank. Among them are the Treasures of Nimrud -- more than 600 pieces of gold, precious stones and ornaments dating back to 800 B.C. The 100-pound collection is not among the artefacts Iraqis may currently view at the reopened museum.

In fact, most Iraqis will not be able to see any of the works on display. The museum will be available only to college and school groups and for some events. Officials also plan to ask travel agents to arrange visits by groups of tourists such as those who now visit neighbouring countries like Syria and Turkey. But with the war in Iraq still dragging on -- albeit at a low grade -- attracting tourists could take as long as it took to reopen the museum.