

PEELKHANA TRAGEDY

Time to probe and punish

The organisation of BDR needs a managerial improvement. It would undoubtedly take time to recover from the tragedy. At the same time the crucial job of restoring the command and control of the border guards would be extremely exacting. The atrocities committed must not go unpunished while delving into the deficits and deviations.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE happenings at Peelkhana BDR Headquarters on 25th February last was indeed a tragedy on all accounts. So many promising lives have been lost in their prime in such mindless violence that otherwise stable and phlegmatic people have been dazed and shocked. The atrocities committed by the rebellious elements against their own superiors are manifest acts of vengeance amounting to insanity when seen against the ethos of a regimented outfit.

The question is, what has gone wrong to warrant such a fatal tragedy? Bearing in mind that it is too early to comment on such horrendous events without the benefits of unfolding facts and circumstances; it would perhaps serve some purpose if one looks at the alleged deprivations and sufferings as repeatedly voiced by the rebels over the electronic media.

Two aspects come out very sharply from the initial reports. One relates to the alleged lack of sensitivity in the grievance redressal mechanism of a vital enforcement unit; and the other to the involvement of a primarily regulatory outfit in matters predominantly commercial. Both are causes for worry for obvious reasons.

One would reasonably expect that the government of the day will delve deep in

to the incident to find out the causative factors and the remedial actions. With the hope that the guilty will be punished and there will be no recurrence of such ghastly aberrations, this writer, in view of his association with the prime law-enforcement organization of the country in the not-to-distant past, would like to record his observations for managerial improvements insofar it relates to police.

There is not much thinking in concerned quarters whether the police in Bangladesh are showing clear signs of

work-related stress and experiencing its negative impact on mental and physical health. Very few seem to care if role ambiguity, role conflicts, work overload, conflicting orders, abnormally extended hours of work both in day and night shifts, criminalization of politics, close nexus among criminals, politicians and bureaucrats, public apathy and collapse of other agencies of criminal justice system are causing worrisome stresses for our police personnel. In Bangladesh, the presence of stress among policemen is still not recog-



nized as a major enemy of law-enforcement professionals.

It is a sad commentary that up till now for a policeman in Bangladesh the focus is always on the job to be done. People have to last a lifetime and strenuous tasks such as policing eventually become too arduous and exacting. Therefore, the special vulnerability of the police as an occupational group to job stress and burnout deserves recognition with a view to looking for the solutions to the problems. The search may impact on operational procedures and future training and illustrate the potential dangers of certain physical and psychological responses which may be amenable to modification through training and other interventions.

On the street level the police job is fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies. The duties of the police officer depend upon such diverse factors as the law, court decisions, the political climate, community pressures and personality of the commander amongst others. The consequent role ambiguity is associated with high job related tension.

A police officer's role in contemporary Bangladesh is rather paradoxical in nature. He comes across conflicting situations when he finds that he has to enforce directives which are not strictly legal and which the public wishes that the police would discreetly ignore. Fulfilling the expectations of the public and obligation to his organizational role poses a very difficult situation causing stress to individual officers. This role conflict occurs when simultaneous advent of two or more sets of pressures are such that compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other.

Therefore, the greatly increased conflicts of role expectations, organizational and institutional constraints, unrealistic demands and dilemmas of the cop in uniform need to be examined explicitly.

Looking into the travails of the police one would find that police work is arduous, often dirty and unpleasant and sometimes dangerous. Night work is a standard feature of their life. They are not paid for overtime work. They too often work on holidays and during festivals. While illustrating the process of dehumanization in the departmental culture of the police, it has been observed that prolonged absence of any family life and absence of nearness to children deprive the policeman of the feel of family life. Absence of reasonable vacation coupled with increasing task pressures drive policeman to do wrong things. A little bit of sadism also creeps in as he is made to sacrifice all he has and receive public condemnation as reward.

Most of us in Bangladesh are familiar with the sloppy, discourteous, rude, aggressive and bully figure in police uniform but we do not seem to realize that policemen are largely underpaid, overworked, demoralized, inadequately trained and equipped and subject to political interference, feared as a persecutor rather than respected as a protector, often callous and corrupt. Analysts had found that police unrest in the past was a cumulative result of managerial mismanagement, absence of a sense of accomplishment and growth, neglect of basic physiological and psychological needs, absence of effective grievance redress machinery, emasculated leadership, absence of participative management and unsatisfactory working and living conditions.

Police organization in Bangladesh needs to sit up and take note of the crucial problem of job stress. A comprehensive plan for the recognition, diagnosis and management of stress and stress control programmes for police personnel might help resolve the problem. The subordinate officials who are the most stressed groups should be given counseling for better coping. Both the individuals and the organization must participate in the stress resolution process.

The police organization should be engaged to employ the services of psychologist at the time of selection and placement and choose individuals more suitable to perform the job effectively. Right job redesigning may help reduce the stress levels. Clarifying the organizational goal in consonance with law may reduce stressful situations.

The police organization must look beyond the military model; reorient its structure, policies and procedures; provide adequate support and organizational intervention to the management of stress within the law enforcement agency. Our policemen are truly a stressed lot. Psychological services and trained psychologist must be made an integral part of the organizational setup.

Like police the organisation of BDR also needs a managerial improvement.

It would undoubtedly take time to recover from the tragedy. At the same time the crucial job of restoring the command and control of the border guards would be extremely exacting. The atrocities committed must not go unpunished while delving into the deficits and deviations.

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Suffocating traffic jam

Alleviation brooks no delay

One of the principal reasons for the unacceptable traffic jams is bad planning of city roads. For the last two decades, governments have been trying various methods of solving the traffic problems. No appreciable improvement could be made. Instead, the situation is deteriorating rapidly. Patchwork cannot reduce the suffering of the people.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE city of Dhaka is one of the most densely populated and poorly planned cities in the world. With a population of over 12 million it does not have enough parks, car parking spaces, open spaces, playgrounds, roads (particularly east-west) etc. Compared to even some less developed cities of Africa our civic facilities are not enough.

Dhaka is a 400 years old city, and was once considered attractive. With the growth and development of the city of Kolkata it started losing glamour. However, it started regaining its importance with the creation of Pakistan, as one of its provincial metropolises. It became the capital of Bangladesh after independence in 1971.

Though a capital development authority was set up -- the Dhaka Improvement

Trust (an autonomous body under department of local government and rural development) -- it could not fulfil the objective to a satisfactory level. It tried to compromise with the original master plan because it had to face challenges from the then influential persons (e.g. Green Road was to have the width of 150 feet but it had to be settled at only 60 feet).

A Greek town-planning firm was engaged to prepare a master plan for the city in 1950. But it was neither a reputed firm nor did it have adequate experience. As such, it failed to come up with a quality master plan. Moreover, no one could envisage that Dhaka would become such a big city in less than six decades. Thus, we face so many civic problems. In fact, due to unplanned industrialisation, poor city plan, and influx of rural population, it has become extremely challenging for concerned authorities to cope with the problems.

Since 1947, little attention was paid to development of Dhaka from the level of a provincial town to that of a city of international standard. Though Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) was converted into an Authority and named Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipaksha (Rajuk) in 1987 for rapid development of the city the organisation could not fulfil its objective due the following factors: (a) Wrong transfer of the organisation from the ministry of local government to the ministry of public works; (b) Lack of technically qualified personnel in the organisation; (c) Neither the ministry of public works nor Rajuk showed any interest in preparing a master plan for Dhaka city.

One of the principal reasons for the unacceptable traffic jams is bad planning of city roads. For the last two decades, governments have been trying various methods of solving the traffic problems.

Even assistance of the armed forces was taken. No appreciable improvement could be made. Instead, the situation is deteriorating rapidly. By now, the authorities concerned must be aware of the fact that patchwork cannot reduce the suffering of the people.

What is needed is adopting short and long-term measures to obviate the difficulties. The following short term measures are

proposed: (a) transferring Rajuk from the ministry of public works to the ministry of local government and rural development; (b) two or three timings for opening and closing of city schools; (c) shifting of the headquarters of certain autonomous bodies from Dhaka to appropriate divisional headquarters; (d) shifting the old secretariat to a new secretariat complex and accommodating all head offices of

attached and subordinate offices in the old secretariat complex as early as possible; (e) demolishing unauthorised structures; (f) evicting illegal pavement occupiers; (g) constructing more flyovers and underpasses; (h) imposing restriction on construction of high-rise buildings; (i) allowing right turn in certain crossings; (j) converting four-way crossings into two-way crossings; (k) establishing sub-control rooms at traffic signal points instead of automatic signal system; (l) withdrawing jalopies and more than 20-year old vehicles from the streets; and, (m) marking separate lanes for motorised and non-motorised vehicles where possible.

With the implementation of short term measures for easing traffic jams the government should start work on long-term planning simultaneously to avoid greater problems in future. It is heartening to know that the percent government is considering taking up a project for underground railway for the city of Dhaka.

The problem of traffic jam is getting worse at an alarming rate. Already, it is affecting our economic and social life. Thus, the need for solution of the problem brooks no further delay.

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Union in crisis

A government should be capable of looking beyond immediate challenges to cooperating in finding solutions. That, one might naively think, is the purpose of an association like the EU. Yet there's little sign of such action so far. Despite Steinbrück's warning, Europe is not about to revert to the 1930s. But in the conflict between the Union's broad communitarian ambitions and immediate imperatives bearing down on politicians, it's clear which is winning, with potentially damaging long-term consequences.

JONATHAN FENBY

BUFFETED by the worst recession in 50 years, the European Union is in danger of unraveling. There's fear that the European project may be damaged as protectionist pressures mount and the downturn sharpens differences among countries. Countries that rubbed along when the going was good are scrambling for national solutions in place of a collaborative effort. Papering over cracks that always marked the European club becomes more difficult as companies close, jobless queues lengthen, banks report record losses and the public calls for solutions that escape politicians.

Safeguarding national interests, as opinion poll ratings fall and popular protests emerge, can easily shade into protectionism. This would undermine the single European market and the supposedly level playing field at the base of the community, with the bigger members letting smaller, weaker economic crash into the wall. Easing financial rules

is a natural reaction in hard times, but could undermine the regulations governing the euro, to the delight of some EU leaders who have long resented the iron hand of the central bank in Frankfurt. Growing antipathy to workers from the new member nations could damage the EU's open-door policy.

It's now plain that European governments failed to appreciate the scale and depth of the crisis; the assertion to parliament last year by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown that British banks had been saved has become a bad joke with a string of worsening results from the City of London, topped by a £10 billion loss for the HBOS bank, taken over by Lloyds last autumn. The initial schadenfreude of mainland Europe towards the "Anglo-Saxon neo-liberals" of the US and Britain has been replaced by something close to panic as the crisis spreads from the financial world to the real economy.

If Brown's reputation as the economic manager has taken a nasty drubbing, events have turned the electoral promises

of economic liberalisation from France's President Nicolas Sarkozy on their head. The German model looks vulnerable to the downturn in world trade, with a 2.1 percent contraction in gross domestic product for the last quarter of 2008, the sharpest drop since reunification in 1990. France, Italy and Spain also recorded much bigger GDP declines than expected during the same quarter.

The euro common-currency zone countries face their worst recession with GDP dropping by 1.5 percent in the fourth quarter of 2008. The bond market reflects concern about state finances in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Ireland and Greece. Unemployment is rising and may go up by 50 percent this year.

Adding to the threat of this economic and financial fog enveloping Europe is the rise of popular anger, especially with elections due in Germany and Britain in 2010.

The ire against bankers is spreading, with riots in Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria. Trade unions claim to have convinced a million people to join a

January national protest in France, called against Sarkozy's policies but couched in the broader context of the downturn as marchers identified the president with forces costing jobs and security expected from government. Though globalisation has benefited European companies, open borders and free trade elide with the toxic financial waste in a broad brush rejection of the past decade.

The call for politicians to "do something," quickly, to end the crisis is whistling for the moon. There are no short-term solutions. But it's not a demand which government leaders can ignore, and the deeper danger rests in their reaction. Speaking at a meeting of the Group of Seven finance ministers in Rome, German minister Peer Steinbrück warned that protectionist measures could turn a financial crisis into a re-run of the 1930s disasters. Indeed, there are disturbing signs of rising populist protectionism.

Given Sarkozy's hyper-activism, it's not surprising that France should be at the eye of the storm after he announced a €6.5 billion aid plan for French automakers, suggesting that they should repatriate production from Central Europe to protect jobs at home. That set protectionist alarm bells ringing in Brussels and brought caustic rejoinders from the Czech Republic, which took over the rotating European Council presidency from France this year and has been annoyed by the French leader's patronising remark that Prague was doing the best it could in the job.

Nor did the French president help

cross-channel relations when he used a television interview to deride the British economic model for depending too heavily in financial services: Downing Street hit back, citing figures showing that manufacturing represents a bigger slice of the British economy than in France. But Sarkozy is far from alone.

German firms have gained an advantage with government measures to reduce non-wage labour costs. An applause-grabbing remark to a Labour Party conference about "British jobs for British workers" has come back to haunt Brown as workers protesting foreign labour brandish placards with his words. Banks in Britain helped by the government are told to lend to the domestic market, not to foreigners. Questioned about this, Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling responded that taxpayers expected this and that other governments should do the same.

Aid packages for French and German banks go against the spirit of EU competition policy. Despite summit meetings and expressions of goodwill in seeking joint solutions, the actions of major EU countries make it clear that priorities are overwhelmingly domestic, whatever the repercussions for weaker neighbours and, longer term, for themselves.

The French leader has long chafed under the budget limits set by the European Central Bank, and governments in countries hard hit by the crisis are likely to agitate for relaxation of rules, even if this brings them into conflict with

the Germans. "In a time of economic crisis, we see atavistic instincts emerging," Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg told the New York Times in mid-February.

Czech Prime Minister, Mirek Topolánek, warned against "beggar-thy-neighbour" policies among the 27 member states and called a EU summit before the end of this month to coordinate policies.

This was meant to be the year when the EU marched on to a new stage in its development, with the president of the European Council serving 30 months rather than the present six-month rotation and a newly anointed diplomatic chief giving the community more global clout. Whether that happens is a matter of crystal-ball gazing. All that's evident is the economic crisis risks tearing holes in Europe's fabric woven over the last 50 years.

A government should be capable of looking beyond immediate challenges to cooperating in finding solutions. That, one might naively think, is the purpose of an association like the EU. Yet there's little sign of such action so far. Despite Steinbrück's warning, Europe is not about to revert to the 1930s. But in the conflict between the Union's broad communitarian ambitions and immediate imperatives bearing down on politicians, it's clear which is winning, with potentially damaging long-term consequences.

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