

## Crossfire deaths must stop

*It's a violation of the most basic law, and giving Bangladesh a bad name*

LET us begin with the hard truth. It is that the recurrent incidents of so-called crossfire deaths are beginning to give Bangladesh a bad name around the world. It is not just Amnesty International which is concerned about the seeming impunity with which agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion have been shooting people dead. There are others, in the country and outside, who are repelled by such unacceptable patterns of behaviour on the part of an agency of the state. The latest incident of the killing of two young men in the Jatiyo Sangsad area by RAB only underscores the malignancy that goes in the name of 'crossfire.' It deepens our sense of shame about ourselves, especially at a time when we are collectively striving to establish a social system based on the rule of law.

From our point of view, an opinion we strongly believe is shared by very large sections of people in Bangladesh, those who have caused the deaths of individuals from so-called crossfires over the years have committed a most reprehensible act. The values and standards of civilized behaviour which have underlined our evolution and development as a society and nation have clearly been laid low by the propensity on the part of security agencies to shoot citizens dead and then come up with the old stereotyped explanations of the victims having opened fire on the RAB men, who in turn were compelled to shoot back and kill them. Such explanations have become at best a joke and at worst an outrage. We believe these crossfire incidents, which in truth are extra-judicial murders, should forthwith be stopped and those responsible for them should be made answerable to the law. Unless such action is taken, we will be looked upon as a nation acquiescing in such deplorable instances of make-believe drama and of course grave human rights violations.

We must also note here that the nation had expected pro-active action from the newly elected government on the issue of extra-judicial killings. Indeed, the manifesto of the Awami League had promised action on the issue. Sadly, though, despite nearly five months having elapsed since its coming into office, the government has failed to tackle the issue head-on. Making things worse is the foreign minister's comment that the culture of crossfire killings cannot come to an end overnight. Let us note that killing is not and can never be part of culture. And then comes our question: in the suggestion that these killings cannot be ended overnight, might there be a subtle hint that we look away from the issue while the killing goes on, at least for the moment? Surely we expected better from Dr. Dipu Moni.

The deaths of people in supposed crossfires is an affront to the principles of law enforcement and the legal system. To suggest that individuals, even those alleged to be criminals, be swiftly dispatched in questionable circumstances is a perversion of logic and reason. Unless these deaths are stopped, the credibility of the government where promoting democracy is concerned will take a bad mauling, both at home and abroad. That is surely not a prospect we look forward to. Let us not forget, each time a cross-fire death occurs, it stands out as an expression of no-confidence in rule of law.

## Traders reap benefits of procurement drive

*Lower cost of production, more banks loan to farmers*

WE are concerned at the field reports that instead of farmers it is the traders who are making profits from the rice procurement drive. Peasants are selling paddy to the millers and traders at lower prices than the rate fixed by the government. The farmers in the major rice-growing areas like the northern districts and Comilla region are selling paddy at around Tk 400 and Tk 450 per maund respectively, whereas the government price is fixed at Tk 560. Farmers are saying that the prices they are getting from traders or millers do not even cover their cost of production.

Why they are constrained to sell to the traders? There is the phenomenon of the cycle of paying back loans at high interest rates to the lenders for which farmers hardly see profits at the end of the day. Traditionally, small and medium scale farmers borrow money from the traders at high interest rates because of lack of bank loan facilities, and as a result, they are compelled to sell paddy to them after harvest. This is the main reason why farmers cannot sell paddy directly to the government at the fixed price.

This clearly indicates how the farmers are not seeing any profit after doing all the hard work. It is indeed disturbing that though the government price is aimed at safeguarding farmers' interests, in reality the subsidy is going to the pockets of the millers and traders since the government is procuring bulk of rice and paddy from them. Sensing the government high procurement price, traders and millers had reportedly purchased huge amounts of paddy ahead of the procurement drive.

It has been suggested that gradually, the government should build up capacity for buying paddy directly from the farmers for drying, milling and stocking. We feel this should be given utmost attention by the authorities concerned, besides forming a national price commission to fix prices of agricultural products for ensuring farmers' interests. Also, serious effort should be made to cut down the input costs of production by increasing subsidies in that area. Farmers must be given all out support for keeping the wheels of economy rolling.

## Tales of two women

It is true that access to assets, not relief, is a sine qua non for helping the poor in a sustainable fashion. But some assets, such as livestock or trees, have a gestation period to yield dividends. In between, there should be provisions for meeting consumption needs even for very short periods.

ABDUL BAYES

**D**OLEYA (40) of Ghatak Char Village was married at 16. Not surprising, since early marriage in rural areas is a regular phenomenon. Doleya's husband is an agricultural labourer -- owning only 2 decimals of homestead land. Despite his sincere devotion, he could do little to feed a family of seven due to his prolonged illness.

Out of their five children, only one is working in a factory to earn a meager monthly income of Tk.1,300. Two of the children go to schools and two are yet to step into school. They need more than 3kgs of rice per day, which means about Tk.70-75 per day is spent for rice only.

Cyclone Sidr, that swept the southern districts of Bangladesh in 2007, hit Doleya's household very hard. The house was severely damaged and the only non-land assets that they had -- two goats -- were also lost.

Further, the demand for agricultural labour dwindled drastically because of the damages inflicted on the crops. As a result, the feeble income that her husband had earned was also falling. Doleya's husband died few months back. The woman of our story, thus, was driven to deep darkness and, seemingly, there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

But life goes on, and people lean on different ladders of livelihoods. To start with, people helped her repair the house damaged by Sidr. She also borrowed

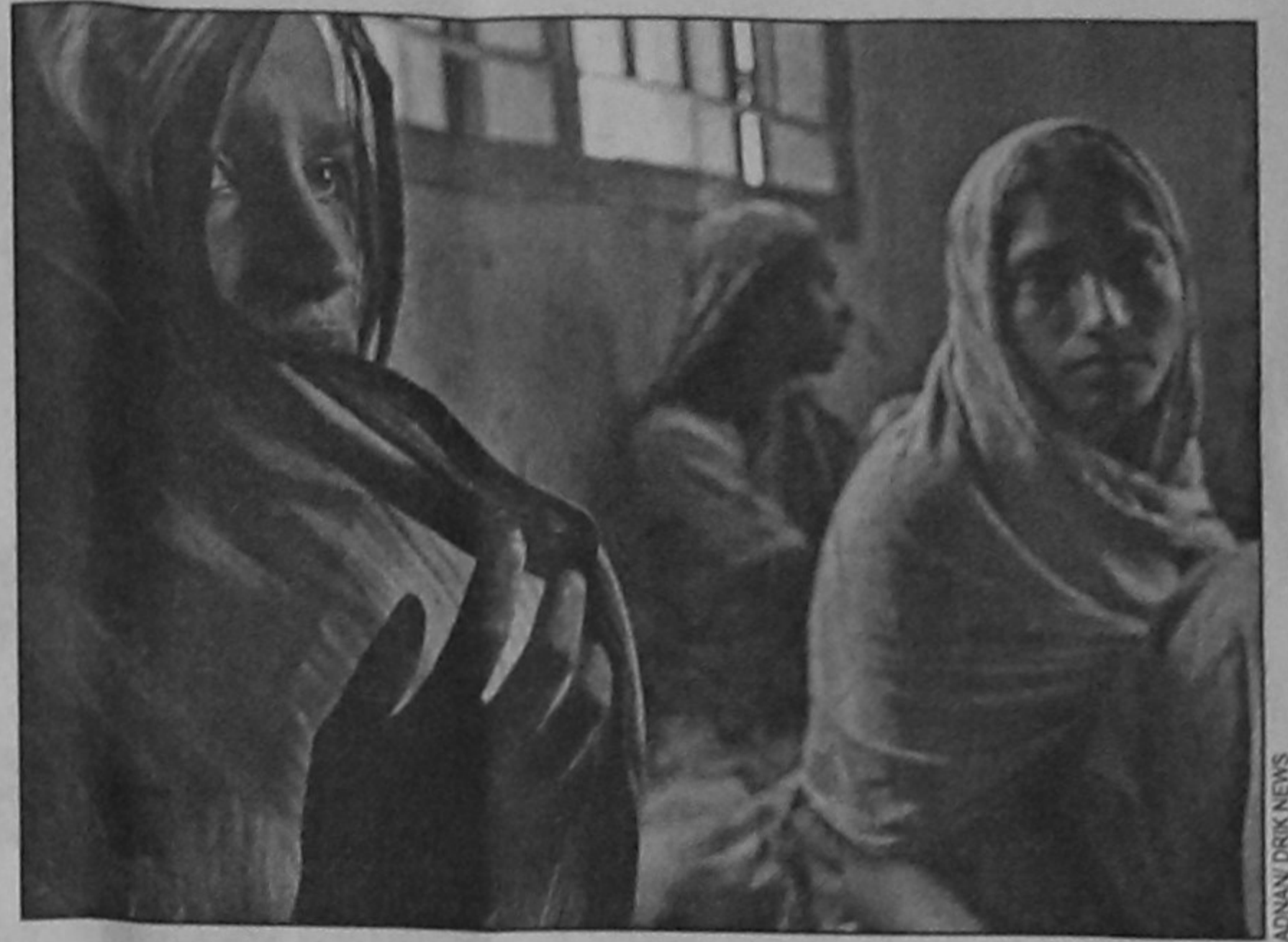
Tk.2,000 from a neighbour to fry peanuts. Both of these are possibly the output of the "social capital" that she developed over time. The money from selling fried peanuts give her a profit of Tk.100-150 per day. By selling nuts, she cleared the debt that accrued on account of her husband's illness.

Meantime, in the aftermath of the cyclone, a Brac survey identified Doleya as a deserving candidate for aid. She got two goats from Brac under EU grant. Now she has few more in stock. There has, thus, been an increase in her endowments of assets within a couple of months.

The lady now plans to sell these goats in a very short time and wishes to buy a cow. The cow would provide milk to generate more income and the calves would form capital stock.

Doleya also informed us (requesting secrecy) that she has a life insurance policy that would mature very soon. She learnt about this from another woman from the same village and had been paying Tk.100 per month as premium for a long time. She knows it well that after her death, her family members would get Tk.1.5 lakh or so. And to keep these vital documents safe, she has already made a wooden box to keep them safe and locked away.

"Are you happy now?" I asked her. "Yes I am happy now as I have no loan to leave behind. Rich people cannot sleep well due to loans, but I can," said Doleya although she didn't have meat since the last Eid-ul-



Victims of natural disasters need temporary aid for sustained well-being.

Azha and has fish only two days a month.

I met another wonderful woman, Begum (35), in Madaripur. She lives with her ailing husband and two children. Her prime occupation is selling saris across villages. But the most important point to note here is that she herself goes to Dhaka (Gulistan and Islampur) to buy 30 saris, spending Tk.300 as bus fare per trip. She commutes 4-5 times a month between Dhaka and Madaripur.

Unfortunately, Sidr also impinged heavy tolls on her household. The business capital accumulated had to be spent in meeting the exigencies. But being on Brac's list of candidates for immediate grants from EU, she got Tk.4,000 to restart her business.

Her ailing husband continues to sell vegetables to supplement Begum's efforts. But the most important source of

income for the household remains to be her selling the saris. Had she not been provided the capital, her household might have faced a serious blow at that time.

Begum reckons that she is far better now than before. She already repaired the house, bought 5 poultry birds, and accumulated a saving of Tk.40,000. She plans to buy a goat and a cow so that she, too, can generate more income and build more assets.

The moral of the story is: it is true that access to assets, not relief, is a sine qua non for helping the poor in a sustainable fashion. But some assets, such as livestock or trees, have a gestation period to yield dividends. In between, there should be provisions for meeting consumption needs even for very short periods.

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## Regime change in Nepal

What if the new constitution is not formulated by then, or what if the Maoists intensify protests to capture state power through force. The new government has too short a time to settle all those disputes and accomplish the desired jobs.

INDRA DHOJ KSHETRI

**A**FTER three weeks of political turmoil, Nepal has finally got a new coalition government. The moderate communist party, UML led coalition, has replaced the hard-line Maoist led coalition. When the Maoists pulled out of the government, opposition parties had to toil hard and wait long to materialise such a coalition to achieve a majority in the jumbo 60-member constituent assembly (CA), and subsequently lead the government. All these mammoth efforts have put a veteran communist politician Madhab Kumar Nepal at the helm.

The fall of the Maoist-led government in Nepal had pushed the country into an unprecedented political turmoil. It was unthinkable that the rule of the former Maoist rebels would be so short lived.

The crisis was ignited by the Maoists' move to sack the army chief without the consent of the coalition partners. This forced the disgruntled coalition partners to withdraw their support, turning the Maoists into a minority. The opposition Nepali Congress, especially India, put pressure on President Dr. Rambaran Yadav to overturn the government's decision. The

president could not sustain the pressure and reinstated the sacked army general, Rukmangad Katawal.

In another unprecedented move following the president's order, the Maoist Prime Minister Prachanda stepped down, protesting "dual power centres." Now, they have decided to launch political showdowns across the country against the president's "unconstitutional move." They have also said that they would not join any coalition to form a government unless the president "rectifies his move." Now, the largest party in the CA has opted to sit in the opposition.

Though a new government is in place, the turmoil is not over yet. The three-year-long peace process is at risk, the elected CA, which is obliged by law to write a new constitution by June next year, is virtually at a standstill, and some of the popular programs initiated by the Maoist-led government are at stake.

Integration of the rebel army into the national army and other security forces or its rehabilitation into society has been jeopardised as the former rebels and the national army face each other in a cold war like situation.

The newly formed government has many Herculean tasks to accomplish. Though the parties have succeeded in gaining a majority

in the 60-member CA, such a coalition is so fragile that it may break up anytime. The wrangling has already begun in the allocation of ministries.

Besides, the UML expressed commitments to the extremely contradicting demands of the parties while making this coalition. These commitments will prove very costly when the government begins functioning. Containing the kingmaker regional parties will, especially, be the biggest challenge for the new prime minister.

The new government will have to spend much of the time handling the outraged Maoist cadres, who have now moved to street protests that will continue across the country. One indigenous group in the southern plains has already announced protest programs as a welcome note to the new government. Handling these groups is extremely important but very tricky.

Though the Maoists were unscrupulous in handling the treasury, they were able to introduce some extremely popular programs for the rural and urban poor. These programs have further attracted large chunks of the population towards the Maoists.

For the Maoist government, they were pilot projects. The burden of implementing the full-fledged programs has been transferred to this government, but it will be very difficult with the limited resources. The new government has to include them in the budget.

The biggest challenge for the new government will be to contain the Maoists in the CA so that the constitution writing process moves smoothly. The CPN Maoist's seats in the CA amount to more than the

sum of two other largest parties, Nepali Congress and UML.

By law, this government can stay in power till next June, and has to give the new constitution by then. The law also demands that a two-thirds majority pass each article of the new constitution. It seems almost impossible for the CA to function smoothly when the Maoists are unwilling to let the credit go to their rivals.

There are fears of a bigger setback in the political developments. What if the new constitution is not formulated by then, or what if the Maoists intensify protests to capture state power through force. The new government has too short a time to settle all those disputes and accomplish the desired jobs.

Yet, the new prime minister enjoys the benefit of the doubt -- the veteran leader has not been tested as the leader in the government yet. The success of the government depends upon his ability to placate the former rebels. The best way for the prime minister to guarantee smooth functioning of the government will be, in any way, to bring the Maoists into the ruling coalition.

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### Our Apologies

The article entitled "Bismillah and Rabindranath" appearing in *The Daily Star* on May 16, 2009 erroneously attributed a speech to the Education Minister. The author regrets the mistake and apologises to the minister for it. For its part, *The Daily Star* also apologises for publishing it without verification.

## Come Holy Spirit and renew our hearts

God empowers us with His Spirit so that we can live the new and glorious life of love and peace and justice in fellowship with God and also with other people. Had we have them in us today the world would be an altogether different place!

REV. MARTIN ADHIKARY

**T**ODAY is the Pentecost Sunday. Christians all over the world commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles of Christ who were gathered together in Jerusalem and were praising and praying.

This event is narrated in Chapter 2 of The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. This is how the Church came into form and the disciples spread around with the gospel of Christ and preach that Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God created the universe with His word full of the power of His Spirit. According to the Bible when God created the universe His spirit was hovering above the waters and the formless chaos. Out of this chaos God formed and shaped His creation. God did all His works with His Spirit.

Spirit is life giving and it is the power that helps man to have vital relationship with God. When God had created Adam and Eve

out of dust He breathed this Spirit into their dummy-body and only then they became living souls. All the miracles that God's prophets performed were possible only because of the presence of the Spirit in them. The virgin birth of Christ, was born of the Holy Spirit. That's why he is also called "The Ruh-ul-ullah."

All the works, the miracles that he also did were done in and through the power of the Spirit. He was resurrected from the dead also by the same power. Christ's ascension into Heaven 40 days after his resurrection from death was followed by the pouring down of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples 10 days later; hence the name Pentecost (from Greek word "pentecostes" meaning "the fiftieth day").

On Pentecost Sunday, the Church celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the lives of Christ's first disciples. The Holy Spirit descended from heaven for their empowerment and transformation into an entirely new quality of life. The

Spirit transformed the apostolic community into a community of sharing and caring for others. The Holy Spirit gave them a new vision and hope and strength to transform the lives of other people.

All life and creation of God is good in essence. But where there is the impact of evil and Satanic force creation is imperiled and life is made horrible and meaningless. We are born and live in a violent world, a world where destruction, devastation and plundering of God's creation is the rule of the day. Because of man's greed and pride and the reckless use and abuse of God's creation man in alienated from the rest of creation. We need to redeem the lost harmony between nature and mankind.

Today we need the power and enabling of the Spirit for our renewal in our minds and hearts so that we can fight the forces that beset our lives, the forces that dehumanises people. We need to be liberated from our selfishness, ego and our inconsideration for others. We see and experience so much demonstration of the work of the devil. The power of the Holy Spirit can give us strength to stand against this evil force.

Pentecost comes every year with the message of liberation from all that negates life and oppose God's holy will for justice and peace. Today humanity is so divided and sub-divided from the points of view

not only of race, gender, clime, culture, creed, colour and the like, but also from the points of view of diverse interests and concerns. There is injustice and gross violation of basic human rights in every place and in every society.

God wants people to sincerely strive and work for justice and lasting peace. We all may long for peace, but all of us are not being ready to make any sacrifice for peace. Without a sacrifice made we cannot achieve a society or community where lasting peace will prevail.

All human lives are precious to God. Because God wants that all human persons have access to equal rights and opportunities to develop full potential and life is made enjoyable and dignified.

God empowers us with His Spirit so that we can live the new and glorious life of love and peace and justice in fellowship with God and also with other people. Had we have them in us today the world would be an altogether different place!

We pray that God, the Holy Spirit will grant us the power and quickening for the healing and renewal in our personal lives and also in the lives of other people for the promotion of true peace and goodwill among men.

Reverend Martin Adhikary is Director of Advocacy and Promotion of the Leprosy Mission, Bangladesh.