

Diplomats' worry over crime

A resolute handling of law and order situation called for

IT is surely a matter of shame when even foreigners based in Dhaka on diplomatic assignment begin to feel themselves under threat from criminal elements. Indeed, as the dean of the diplomatic corps has already pointed out in a letter to the Foreign Office, there have been specific incidents where foreigners were mugged and threatened with physical injury if they refused to hand over their belongings to gangs of youths accosting them on the road. And these incidents have been taking place in supposedly the most secure of urban areas such as Gulshan and Baridhara. Where earlier the probability of diplomats coming under assault from criminal elements in Bangladesh was unthinkable, it is now clear that the overall slide in law and order we notice in the capital has simply spilled over into its diplomatic enclave.

Every now and then citizens have been reassured by the authorities that arresting law and order downslide has been accorded a high priority. As if to prove the point that crime could not make any entry into vulnerable areas, police checkposts were set up and individuals and vehicles under suspicion have been subjected to detailed search by the law enforcers. But that does not appear to have helped the situation any. What we have before us now is a perceptible surge in criminal activities ranging from the petty to the grave. Muggers and extortionists have been very active, thereby threatening the social equilibrium.

The fact that there have been periodic changes in the police administration (and these changes were meant to bring about an improvement in the law and order situation) has hardly had any impact on the ground. For all the hoopla about special drives against crime and the like, nothing substantive has been noticed where a lessening of criminal activities is concerned. What is truly bizarre is that criminals clearly seem to be outsmarting the police all the time. Despite all the pious sentiments expressed regarding a resolute handling of crime and despite the ubiquitous presence of the police everywhere, muggings, robberies and killings have continued. Criminals move around the city almost at will in CNG scooters and taxis, targeting people at bus and railway stations as well as lanes and streets all over town. Amazingly, the police do not seem to know how to deal with the menace. Surveillance has generally been marked by failure and intelligence gathering has been poor. Often, streetlights do not function. Of course, senior police officials claim that the situation has improved. But that has been more notional than real.

In these circumstances, it is for the administration, particularly the home ministry, to convince people that it is capable of turning Dhaka and by extension the rest of the country into a crime-free zone. Unless that happens, it is essentially the economy which will take a bad mauling.

Perks and facilities to MPs

We are all for these, but hoping they will change the legacy of waste

MARKING a healthy departure from the much abused practice of providing duty-free luxurious cars to MPs, many of them finding their way to the open market, henceforth the lawmakers will have vehicles from a pool created for them. This is a move in the right direction, although all concerned must still be conscious of the fact that purchase of new vehicles even slightly lower down the luxury scale for large numbers of MPs and upazila chairmen would be a financially strenuous undertaking, especially in these hard times.

It also sounds positive that the Speaker has been empowered to limit the office allowances of VIPs in parliament and entertainment allowances will also be whittled down, unlimited expenditure in the last parliament under such heads having drawn sharp criticism. We welcome the new-found sensitivity to public sensibilities hoping that this will be reflected on other heads of expenditure as well.

The lawmakers' long-felt need for offices with secretarial service is also going to be met, it is understood. As a matter of fact, we are for an adequate complement of facilities to be provided to the MPs, but these must be utilised judiciously so as to achieve maximum output from them. Why we are having to say this is because MPs have been known for piling up arrears in crores of takas in unpaid telephone bills and other utility charges despite being provided with allowances.

If elected public representatives were so derisive with rules that ordinary citizens have to comply with on pain of punishment what moral authority habitually defaulting lawmakers could claim to represent their constituencies? People expect the MPs to change that legacy. Their status as elected public representatives to the House of the people demands of them to set examples of sincerity, honesty and commitment to public welfare, welfare of the taxpayers who sacrifice so much for them so that they can represent the people more effectively and serve them in full measure.

An open letter to President Obama

The people you need to reach out to in Muslim countries, the real change agents, the ones doing God's work, are the liberal democrats, who continue to fight tirelessly for tolerance and human dignity, for equality and justice for all.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

LET me start by congratulating you on your historic address to the Muslim world at Cairo University yesterday. You promised us that it would be something special, and we were not disappointed.

The message that you have sent to the Muslim world is clear and unequivocal: let us have a new beginning. You have extended the hand of friendship, with the promise to listen and to move forward in amity on a basis of mutual respect between the Muslim world and the US.

The speech hit all the right notes, but more than anything you said, it was the sense that you truly respect Islam, are sympathetic to Muslim grievances, and are willing to sit down and talk as equals, that really resonated.

But where do we go from here? Speeches are one thing, but concrete action is another. What we in the Muslim world are hoping for is a complete re-imagining of US-Muslim relations, and while respect is as good a place to start as anywhere else, the question remains as to how that will be manifested in terms of policy.

Your speech laid out policy prescriptions in Afghanistan and Iraq, for the Middle East peace process and Iran, and spoke in visionary terms about helping to support education and innovation in the Muslim world.

This is all well and good. But let us get down to the nitty-gritty about what needs to be done and what the fundamental

change from the Bush years needs to be.

The fundamental problem that stymied the Bush administration's outreach to Muslims was that the Bush administration was uncomfortable with the liberal democrats in Muslim countries.

The liberal democrats were usually far too left-wing for them, and they were viscerally and vocally opposed to Bush's hawkish and unilateralist foreign policy (though, crucially, I would argue that liberal democrats in the Muslim world are anti-Republican, not anti-American, perse).

Perhaps the Bush administration was simply more comfortable with the more right-wing, conservative, traditionalist elements in these countries. I guess they had a lot in common. But while this was fine during the Cold War, it is time for America to update its play-book.

Perhaps it was hard for the Bush administration to switch mind-sets and realise the need to seriously rethink its relations with those that the US has been funding for decades and who until 9/11 seemed like loyal allies, but the time for such action is long overdue.

Perhaps the Bush administration succumbed to the conventional wisdom that, at least in the Arab world, the liberal democrats were all losers who had no popular base.

For these reasons, all over the Muslim world, the Bush administration conspicuously failed to join hands with the real democratic reformers, and, till the end, continued to do business with retrograde and reactionary forces and regimes who, till



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the end, continued to play the US for fools (see, e.g., Pakistan).

You should not make this mistake.

There is a lot of rhetoric coming out of your administration that you do not want to demonise all Muslims and that you wish to reach out to moderate Muslims, as indicated in your speech.

This is all well and good. There is always room for dialogue with well-meaning people who share one's values and aspirations. Certainly there are religious leaders and religious parties in the Muslim world who it is worth forging alliances and understandings with and who can be partners for peace, justice, and equality.

But you should always remember who your true friends are. Those who would deny women an education or equal rights, those who preach the moral inferiority of the West, those who have nothing but contempt for Western values and traditions -- these people are not America's friends, and they never will be.

The people you need to reach out to in

Muslim countries, the real change agents, the ones doing God's work, are the liberal democrats, who continue to fight tirelessly for tolerance and human dignity, for equality and justice for all.

You must not fall for the lie that secularists are anti-Islamic and that liberal democrats are not true Muslims. If you would not want us to think that the Pat Robertsons of the world speak for all Christians, please do not reach out to retrogressive Muslim leaders of the same ilk.

President Obama, you are a man of faith, but you are also a liberal democrat who believes in fundamental and universal concepts of justice and equality. The two are no more mutually exclusive in the Muslim world than they are in the West.

And it is people like this, like yourself, that you need to reach out to in countries like Bangladesh, if your outreach to the Muslim world is to truly make the world a better place and not fall on deaf ears.

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Nothing is settled until settled right

The NPC report says that the BDR mutiny in 2009 was the continuation of earlier revolts in 1973 and 1991, one mutiny every 18 years. Yet another proof that nothing is settled until it's settled right.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

IF the South hadn't finally accepted the outcome of the Civil War as being on the whole just, Gilbert Keith Chesterton observed, Abraham Lincoln would have been wrong in trying to preserve the American Union. In politics at least, right and wrong are matters of consensus. Lincoln summarised it in his own homely words. Nothing is ever really settled, he said, until it's settled right. What he didn't mention is that the settling must happen in people's minds.

Now that the National Probe Committee (NPC) has completed its investigation, the second of the three investigations into the BDR killing to submit its report and the only investigation whose findings have been partially disclosed in public, how does it stand against that Lincolnian standard? Since the army isn't sure if it should release its report in the public domain or hold it close to the chest, is the NPC report going to build consensus? Are the findings of the report going to settle the matter in

the public mind?

The third and the last of the three investigation reports will come from the CID and, as we know, that report is going to be the basis for forming charges and for prosecution. Two dozen BDR men have already died before the trial. A few dozen more might be found guilty, no matter whether they are tried in a military court or a civilian court.

If morning shows the day, the partial disclosure of the second report is roughly what we are going to be officially told about the mutiny. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. The BDR mutiny is BDR business. It was conceived by BDR men, planned by them and implemented by them. So they are the ones who should pay for their crimes.

Be it as it may, is the outcome going to be accepted by people as being on the whole just? May be yes, may be no. When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed, an unusual calm had descended on the people. We don't know if it was fear, shock or something else that paralysed them. They didn't

take to the streets or explode in protest. But after thirty-four years, we know that the people had never condoned that killing and always desired to punish the killers. The same thing is true for the trial of the war criminals. People have been silent at times, but they never abandoned the hope that those who are guilty should be tried.

Time will tell how people are going to react to the way the BDR mutiny has been handled so far. For the time being, let us believe there is no strong attachment to it. It was an act of disgruntled privates who took revenge on their officers because they were abused and deprived. There was no outside force involved in it. No terrorist group had a hand in it, like our commerce minister once opined.

Although one will always wonder why others tried to add flavours to this plain vanilla. Why did a foreign magazine come up with a bare-all story, quoting names of people and sums of money to prove that the mutiny was the outcome of a conspiracy? Who was that foreign journalist, who wrote in a publication in faraway Ghana to counterpose that conspiracy theory with a conspiracy theory of her own?

Anyone, said T.S. Eliot, could carve a goose, were it not for the bones. It's not easy to investigate into a mutiny and then give the full account of what actually happened. It has many bones that clutter the facts, and this government has put together a report

cutting through that clutter, revealing it, albeit partially, for the first time in our history. It has done a commendable job.

But how will the government take it to the next level? Left at face value, it might fester. The NPC report says that the BDR mutiny in 2009 was the continuation of earlier revolts in 1973 and 1991, one mutiny every 18 years. Yet another proof that nothing is settled until it's settled right.

For that reason, the government should consider divulging the findings of all the investigation reports on the mutiny. The reports can also be debated in the parliament. Multi-party committees can scrutinise the findings and make recommendations to the government. In other words, the investigation reports should go through a challenge process to be acceptable and transparent. The government should leave as little room for controversy as possible.

A nation of half-dones remains undone, and this government has the historic opportunity to break that vicious cycle for us. It's settling right many things from the past, and the specter of the BDR mutiny, given proper closure, won't come back to haunt us in future.

More than a change of regime, it will mark a regime of change that this nation will gratefully remember.

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Women in politics and governance

In Bangladesh politics, the reservation of seats for women at local government levels has increased the number of women in politics, but has not ensured their full representation in the decision-making process yet.

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

A century and a half ago, John Stuart Mill asserted that the participation of both the majority and the minority must be ensured for a government to be competent and efficient. He included women in his definition of the enormously disfranchised "minority" of that time. Politicians across national boundaries were slow to heed to this basic tenet of governance of state affairs -- Bangladesh is no exception. However, Bangladesh is catching up faster than most developing countries governed by democratically elected governments.

Prior to the introduction of the local government act 1997, the number of women contesting in local government elections was too small to be viewed as exemplary. For instance, the total number of women contesting for open seat general membership was merely 863 out of 114,699 (0.7%) and 1135 out of 169,643 (0.7%) in the local government elections of 1988 and 1992 respectively. After the direct election allowed "reserved seats" for women, the

number of women competing in the 1997 and 2003 elections saw a big surge.

In the 1997 election, 44,134 women contested the reserved seats with 14,029 winning the seats (of which 592 were elected unopposed). In the 2003 election, 39,419 women candidates joined the race for 12,669 reserved seats. Such a big surge of women candidates drew the attention and interest of the women community in the country's political process.

A pertinent question: Did the surge in women's representations in local government ensure their voice in the decision making process of the Union Parishads (UP)? In my quest for that answer, I conducted a research on 107 elected women members of nine upazilas of Rajshahi district in mid 2007. Not surprisingly, my findings revealed that women UP members work in an inhospitable environment of non-cooperation from their male colleagues, who view the women members as inefficient and unable to carry out their responsibilities properly.

I quickly discovered that the laws and

procedures governing UP activities are vague, problematic and outdated, if you will -- they lack specificities of responsibilities of the women members in the UP. As a consequence, women members are routinely discriminated against in the distribution of UP responsibilities and projects. Sometimes, the projects are distributed to the general members in the absence of women members. They often tolerate degrading behaviour for fear of being harassed.

My studies also found that membership in different committees aren't distributed equally and fairly among the women members. Government instructions to set up new committees to be chaired by women members went unheeded. These and many other impediments frustrated and discouraged women from being active and influential in the UP decision making process.

At present, a UP is composed of 13 members -- a chairman, nine members elected from the general seats (in most cases they are all men), and 3 women members from the reserved seats. Obviously, being outvoted in decision making, women members in UP and their presence in committees often turn out to be mere ornamentals.

Discrimination against minorities and women in all spheres of human activities is common more than an exception in all societies. Progress is made but much needs to be done. Modern day women are

increasingly taking leadership positions in politics, business, academics and what not.

In Bangladesh politics, the reservation of seats for women at local government levels has increased the number of women in politics, but has not ensured their full representation in the decision-making process yet. However, there is reason to be optimistic as the imposition of quotas in elected positions is transforming the political culture gradually.

The election of the ninth parliament, in which several women were directly elected from general seats, ushered in fresh enthusiasm among women politicians. Women's participation in the last upazila election was encouraging. Unfortunately, the duties of the women vice-chairmen are yet to be decided.

Most importantly, in the current AL government, four important ministries (prime minister, home, foreign, and agricultural) and the deputy leadership of the parliament have gone to women -- a milestone that could hardly be imagined a decade ago. Hopefully, their success will encourage many talented women lawyers and other professionals to join politics and win elections to participate in the decision making process at all levels of national affairs.

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