

Police action against marchers

Peaceful protests must not be subject to such brutality?

IT is unquestionably bad practice to prevent people from asserting their democratic right to protest. And the practice gets worse when, in order to quell such protests, the law enforcers resort to a baton charge of the protestors. That precisely is what happened on Wednesday when a procession organized by the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports was pounced upon by the police. As so often happens in such instances of harshness demonstrated by policemen, no fewer than thirty people were left with various degrees of injuries on their persons. Among these thirty were ten policemen. It has been given out that the marchers, who were trying to reach the head offices of Petrobangla in Karwan Bazar to register their disapproval of the lease of three offshore gas fields to foreign companies, ended up vandalizing quite a few vehicles as a result of the police action. Vandalism, of course, is always to be condemned. If some of these protestors resorted to violent action, we cannot but unambiguously tell them they did themselves no service.

That said, though, we must go back to the thought of why peaceful marchers must be impeded by the law enforcers every time they seek to draw attention to some grievances they might wish to voice in the national interest. Over the years, even during the period of some elected governments, it has been observed that the police have demonstrated a degree of vehemence and force while dealing with protestors that has left us all wondering about the responsibilities of the state to those who voice a contrary opinion. In the recent past, we have witnessed the police taking, on some crude and indefensible instructions from the powers that be, nearly everyone on the streets into custody on the assumption that everyone is an agitator. Now, even if there are reasons to feel that law and order could be threatened by a protest march, there are sophisticated ways of handling it rather than adopting a knee-jerk position. A fundamental point about the police handling protests is for them to remain absolutely cool in the face of any provocation. Unfortunately, what they did on Wednesday was anything but cool. Besides, the fact that the anti-lease march was peaceful and was led by a number of prominent citizens should have made the police think twice before taking such action.

The point here is not whether the stand of the marchers regarding the lease of the gas fields is right or wrong. It is one of the law enforcers, in these days of enhanced political and democratic sensibilities, needlessly wielding their truncheons on people who only have a point of view to be conveyed to the government. At a time when an elected government is in office, the sight of citizens beaten to the ground by policemen is nothing less than a scandal. We are then all left feeling ashamed.

Threat of swine flu

Preparedness has to be focussed and all-out

THOUGH it is about two months that the first swine flu virus-infected case was detected in the country, a full-fledged public awareness campaign against the pandemic, as promised by the government, is yet to take off. And as if to match it, the level of preparedness to fight the disease, so far as it has been reported in the media, too, leaves much to be desired.

Meanwhile the number of swine flu afflicted patients has jumped to 275, the latest count says. At this stage the natural question that comes to the public mind is: is the health ministry really itself up to the threat and doing all that is necessary to stay fully prepared against what seems to be a rising threat public health? For if it really meant business, then why is it that the designated hospitals are yet to have isolated wards for treatment of the flu and the private hospitals still don't have the medicine? One also hears of complaints from families of the patients that the staffs of some hospitals even denied that they had any facility for treating swine flu, as reported in the newspapers otherwise.

Such lackadaisical attitude in the face of the pandemic has really befuddled the public. That apart, it is also sending conflicting signals to the public as to how to address the ailment since the facility for testing the suspected cases for detection of infection has been withdrawn. What has further confused everyone is the way health minister the other day had put the blame on the press for what he said, 'cooking up' stories about suffering of the swine flu victims seeking treatment in different hospitals.

True, compared to neighbouring India, for example, the spread of the disease is yet to take any serious turn so far. But that should also not be any cause for complacency on our part. For one has to keep in mind that it is spreading fast worldwide. So, without even being an alarmist, there is also no point in unwittingly underplaying the potential hazard the disease poses to local population.

Considering the seriousness of the issue and the need for dispelling fears from the public mind, the government can ill-afford to waste any more time in taking the steps necessary to raise the required mass awareness, mount preparedness against the disease including close surveillance, internalising WHO messages as well as arranging adequate treatment and follow-up measures.

And to meet the challenge, the government should at least be equal to the threat posed by swine flue, if not ahead of it.

The men who killed Sheikh Mujib?

In that case, the conspiracy to kill Sheikh Mujib was organised in a theater-style setting. Those who fired the guns sat at the front. Behind them were those who approved of it and collaborated. How could Shafayat Jamil stay in bed when the tanks rolled behind his house in Dhaka Cantonment! Colonel Faruq, who commandeered those tanks, was a nephew of Brigadier Khaled Musharraf!

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

BACK in 2003, the History Channel in the United States aired a 9-part documentary titled *The Men Who Killed Kennedy*. When the documentary directly implicated former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson in its last episode, it stirred an outcry in the political circuit. The Channel apologised to its viewers and to Mrs. Johnson and her family for airing the show. The moral of the story is that conspiracy theories are like a minefield. Even the most cautious step can land on a pressure plate, exploding in outrage.

Although no such explosion has happened yet, a former general is being prodded for his role as the army chief when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed thirty-four years ago. Fingers are being pointed at him for his mysterious inaction even after he knew that the life of his commander-in-chief was under mortal threat. What the general has said in his defense so far failed to clear the smoke.

That, however, doesn't mean the gen-

eral is guilty as accused. Some people lie through their teeth; others can't tell truth with a straight face. A retired army heavyweight recently defended the general when he claimed that the failure wasn't the general's alone; all of us were to blame for it. It resonates the title of Arundhati Roy's article published in 2005 in *Outlook Magazine*: "Who Pulled The Trigger...Didn't We All?"

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Now we hear that others sat in the rear stall. They neither had a hand in the killing, nor did they do anything to stop it. Then comes the balcony where sat the people. They were the quiet observers,

who didn't feel empowered to do anything.

Between committing, collaborating, compromising and condoning, the motif of the killing comes in four different varieties: retribution, ambition, convenience and indifference. Some of the killers wanted revenge. There were masterminds who harboured ambition. All others condoned and stayed indifferent.

The general, of course, falls under collaboration and convenience. He proved it again and again through his concern for safety and penchant for comfort. The contrast is Colonel Jamil, military secretary to the president, who was pulled by his *semper fidelis*, which means "always faithful." When the president told him on the phone that his house was under attack, he went alone and died in the line of duty.

What did our man the general do when he got the news? Late Lieutenant Colonel M.A. Hamid, who was the station commander in Dhaka Cantonment, gives an account of that crucial moment in his memoirs published in 1993. DGDFI Brigadier Rauf briefed the general on the situation between 2:00 and 3:00am. The general's first reflex was to rush with his family and take cover under a mango tree behind his residence.

Hamid vouches he never had reason to believe that the general played any role in the plot to kill Mujib. But he was confused as to why the general didn't take action when he knew hours in advance that his president was in danger. Shafayat Jamil's

46 Brigade was located only 500 yards from the general's residence. Hamid wonders why the general didn't bother to go there and mobilise troops.

By now it's a foregone conclusion. On August 15, 1975, the general wasn't a hero. He worried more about his own safety than anything else. Then he left the country and worked under the killers because, as he said in an interview, he had no choice. Choices don't make a hero. A hero makes his own choice.

A piece of advice to the general. He should stop digging when he is already in a hole. The more he tries to defend his position, the more poignant becomes his failure. He may not have conspired to kill his boss, but he didn't fight to save him either. Yes, that could be considered a dereliction of duty. Not an honourable thing at all.

Khaled Musharraf lay dead in front of the CMH morgue and soldiers spit on his body. Khondoker Mushtaq died in bed, but his remains a hated name. Ziaur Rahman was killed in a coup, his memory racked by controversy. Lucky for the general, he still lives to tell the tale.

And, he must tell exactly what he should have told in his defense if Mujib were to survive that day. Time has changed, but Mujib still lives in the hearts of millions. For the general's information, if leader is convinced, it will convince them.

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Case distortions and social order

Such social disorder contradicts the whole purpose of having a national government. Citizens elect a group of persons among themselves as the government of the country so that law and order is maintained. It is perceived as a "social contract" between the people and the government, implying that the people give up some rights to the government in order to receive social order.

SYEED AHAMED

GRADUALLY we are getting used to the initial covering up and subsequent disclosure of criminal cases. Under one government, we learn how an apparent killing or a bomb blast is either just an accident or deep-rooted political conspiracy. And then after the change of government, we learn how the criminal cases were distorted during the previous regime to cover up the truth. From "media created" Bangla bhai to the attack on Humayun Azad, or from the Ramna bombing of 2001 to 21st August 2004 grenade attacks -- it's the same story.

The propagated stories, often hilarious, raise concerns over the law enforcing agencies. But all the more astonishing is how the investigators, after the series of exposures of such case-distortions, continue to twist new cases and spin new tales, and still expect us to believe them!

Distortion of a criminal case at the hand of the investigators may emanate from political pressure or from incompetence

in probing the act. In both cases, the investigators try their best to convince everyone that either an apparent murder case was just an accident, or they find an innocent person to "confess" in an effort to hide the actual culprits. The investigators believe that their incompetence or politically motivated wrong doings should be kept secret at any cost. Hence, this cover up process, as we have seen in recent George Miah case, can be very ruthless.

There is, however, a huge difference between politically motivated distortions and distortions out of incompetence.

In the case of politically motivated distortions, there is always a hope that a new government will come to power and bring the culprits to justice. The criminals also remain in fear that one day their incumbent protectors will be voted out from power and the new government will reinvestigate the cases to prosecute the actual criminals. The families of the victims can also keep this faith.

For cover-ups that arise from the

incompetence of the law enforcing agencies to solve any particular case, the end result is rather severe. While the families of the victims remain hopeless, the criminals remain at large. As the criminals become more confident and spread their criminal activities, others get encouraged too.

This makes it all the more essential to reinvestigate the mysterious deaths of Ganatantri Party President Nurul Islam and his son. The initial investigative reports, which concluded that it was a case of electric short-circuit from the fridge, soon came under question when the compressor of the fridge was found intact and the electric cable unplugged. As was seen on TV footage, the mysterious explosion -- which melted down the ceiling fan, shattered the front door of the fridge -- left the back of the fridge intact.

According to some eyewitness accounts, the explosion was too mysterious for the law enforcing agencies to solve because they do not have enough equipments and know-how to scrutinise the case. As for the government, maybe there are too many things on its plate. Hence, though sympathetic to the cause, it's unlikely that it will increase the capacity of the investigators to solve this case.

But this is very unlikely to be just another unresolved case. The criminals have already got the signal that the government is simply incapable of probing their criminal acts. They now know that when it comes to the death of an honest leader like Nurul Islam, they can get away. One unsolved murder, by proving the

incompetence of the state, can invoke further criminal activities. This is how the killings of national leaders have increased over the years. This is how the criminals have established the fact that anarchy prevails instead of justice.

Such social disorder contradicts the whole purpose of having a national government. Citizens elect a group of persons among themselves as the government of the country so that law and order is maintained. It is perceived as a "social contract" between the people and the government, implying that the people give up some rights to the government in order to receive social order. Most historical accounts suggest this as the reason of establishing states and affirm that the principal task of the government is to maintain law and order. Issues such as taxation, budget, development works, and poverty reduction came much later as other government duties.

Hence, it is against the "social contract" to argue that the government cannot spend on investigating a murder case because it has other tasks at hand.

Capacity building of the law enforcing agencies to solve this particular case is essential to protect the nation from similar instances. It is also essential to establish the supremacy of the state power over the criminal minds by solving the case. After all, that's what the government was all about at the first place.

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Opression of women

It is now imperative for the government to go for tough actions against the elements running their own system of justice based on misinterpretation of religious ethos. The government's apathy in tackling these elements, who are masked under religious cover, has emboldened the *fatwa* mongers.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

AGAINST the backdrop of increasing incidents of extra-judicial punishments inflicted on underprivileged women in the rural regions, leading to whipping and caning in the name of *fatwa*, the High Court (HC) has ordered the law enforcers and local government bodies to take immediate measures against such penalties. The HC's order came after hearing a public interest litigation writ petition filed by women's right groups.

The first incident of public humiliation under *fatwa*, a form of religious edit, came to light in 1993 from a village in Sylhet district, where a poverty-stricken young woman named Nurjahan was punished by *dorra* (whipping) because a local cleric issued a *fatwa* that her second marriage was not in conformity with religious injunctions. The woman, in her agony, committed suicide.

Since then, such type of atrocity against

women in the garb of religious ruling has been spreading alarmingly in rural areas of the country. Many young women who had been subjected to such barbaric punishment for alleged sexual indiscretions committed suicide.

The frustrating part is that many villagers, instead of protesting or resisting, enjoy it as a show. It is not a long ago when there was social resistance against harassment of women. But very few people now feel obliged to protest such offences. It seems that some negative force is active in disturbing the polity that our rural people practiced for centuries.

We also heard of so many young girls committing in the recent past, only to have a respite from the incessant teasing. Trisa, Simi, Selina, Salma, Rumi, Fahima, Rini, Luna and Indrani are just the tip of the iceberg, about whom we have known through the media. They are a few in the long list of the teasing victims who were compelled to commit suicide.

The HC declared *fatwa* illegal in 2001.

But the government, in order to appease the religious fundamentalist, appealed to the Appellate Division against the HC ruling, which issued a stay order. Sadly, no government did anything in the last eight years to vacate the stay order.

The HC laid down a set of guidelines in May to tackle sexual harassment of women in educational institutions, factories and workplaces. But no initiative has so far been taken by any concerned body to address the problem.

These ghastly crimes could not continue unabated if the law enforcers had not failed to deal firmly with such crimes. The HC has rightly expressed its indignation at the failure of the law enforcers in this regard.

The incidents of acid attack have decreased after the government tightened the laws. Stringent laws prescribing harsh punishments should be enacted to stop extra-judicial penalties. Police action has also to be more prompt as well as drastic, so that it acts as a real deterrence.

The silence of the rural society has also contributed to the increase of whipping of women under *fatwa*. Alongside the existing legal instruments, social deterrent must also be strengthened to protect the weaker section of people against the criminality of the tormentors. NGOs working in the rural areas should come forward to support the victims as they belong to poor families who are unable to

fight legal battles against the tormentors.

There are at least a dozen organisations, including some NGOs, that have been working for socio-economic and political emancipation of women in the country. And yet the truth staring us in the face is that emancipation of women exists only in theory, not in practice.

Ruthless whipping to punish women under *fatwa* is certainly a slap on the face of our civilized society. It is accelerating our journey back to medievalism in one hand and undermining the country's existing justice delivery system on the other.

It is now imperative for the government to go for tough actions against the elements running their own system of justice based on misinterpretation of religious ethos. The government's apathy in tackling these elements, who are masked under religious cover, has emboldened the *fatwa* mongers.

Though the government takes pride for the modest progress it made in empowering the women, oppression to women is an area that has permeated all pores of success. Whipping under *fatwa*, throwing of acid, and setting on fire, still remain as weapons to punish young women for unrequited love or spurned marriage proposal. It is much to the discredit of the government.

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