

'Crossfire' killings are unacceptable

Only rule of law can ensure citizens' security

THE latest round of BBC Shonglap, as reported in the media, has thrown up some rather interesting as well as intriguing observations. On the one hand, participants on the show as well as part of the audience would like the enactment of a new law to improve law and order rather than a continuation of 'crossfire' methods to dispose of 'criminals.' On the other (and this is where the intriguing bit comes in), there are individuals who seemingly believe that 'crossfires' are an effective way of restoring law and order and ensuring security for citizens. It is this second aspect of the BBC-sponsored dialogue which causes concern. One of the prime reasons behind the voicing of such concerns stems from the views aired by Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan at the dialogue. In his opinion, conventional ways of dealing with criminals have not worked and only 'crossfires' can lead to a restoration of security for people.

That view is as unacceptable as it is untenable. It is unacceptable because extra-judicial killings, which 'crossfires' and custodial deaths have been in Bangladesh over the past six years or so, can never be a substitute for due process of law. It is untenable because only a proper, full and unquestioned application of the law takes account of all the factors involved in a case. More importantly, due process implies that no man or woman is guilty of wrongdoing as long as he or she has not been proven to be guilty. Now, the minister apparently believes that 'crossfires' are an effective way of eliminating criminals. There are two points that arise as a result of such a comment. First, it is for the law to decide who is or is not a criminal. Second, when a government functionary appears to be defending such extra-judicial killings, there is the danger of criminality being encouraged. In a more fundamental way of assessing the situation, it hardly needs saying that extra-judicial killings definitely undermine the very principles of democracy we are trying to build and strengthen in this country.

The perspectives are very clear for all of us. If we wish democracy to take strong roots in Bangladesh, if due process of law and a meaningful observance of human rights are to be ensured, we must go all the way toward making sure that extra-judicial killings, either through so-called crossfires or custodial deaths, are morally and legally put to an end. A welcome provision the Awami League included in its pre-election manifesto last year was to put an end to such killings if it came to power. It is in power. And the nation expects the government it has formed to live up to that pledge. Meanwhile, we recall a bill proposing a ban on extra-judicial killings introduced in the Jatiyo Sangsad recently by a ruling party lawmaker. That speaks volumes about the realities we are confronted with today.

Dhaka's traffic mess

Some short-term solutions are pressingly necessary

THE PM must have been riled enough to direct the minister for communications to do something to ease the unbearable traffic jam in the city's as the party's central committee meeting took up the issue on Saturday. And the minister came under pressure from his colleagues for a substantive effort to reduce, if not rid the capital of its traffic problems.

We are constrained to say that the traffic weeks and special drives have really been of little avail. The much vaunted special drive to ease traffic jam in August this year was an apology; there was no let up in the hardship being faced by the commuters in the capital.

It is regrettable that the problem, instead of attenuating is accentuating by the day, made worse by addition on the streets of almost a hundred and fifty vehicles daily. It is regrettable too that the matter, we feel, has not been addressed with any degree of seriousness so as to prompt the concerned persons to undertake short-term measures to relieve the city dwellers of this dreadful problem. We wonder what has happened to the Dhaka Urban Transport Project's (DUTP) plan that was formulated based upon the recommendations of the Dhaka Integrated Transport Study (DITS).

The PM had directed special measures including construction of elevated expressway to ease the problem. While expressways and flyovers are indeed indispensable measures these are ventures that will take time to plan and implement. Given the traditional lack of commitment of a new government to see through plans and projects initiated by the past government, as in the case of one flyover project in Dhaka, there is no gainsaying that the matter as a whole has not truly received the attention it deserved.

As for the present we suggest that the police display more commitment to see unfit vehicles off the road. There is bound to be jams when private busses and haulers stop in undesignated places under the eyes of the cop. What can one expect when there are thousands of unlicensed rickshaws contributing to the mess with the traffic police turning a blind eye? A great deal of the problem could be reduced if vehicles parked in unauthorised places were impounded or severely fined at the least. Why footpaths can't be rid of vendors and why those using footpaths to dump construction materials can't be taken to task. These do not need additional resources, time or money but only additional commitment of the agencies concerned.

We feel that the relevant ministries must undertake immediate measures simultaneously while undertaking long term steps with a clear-cut vision.

WORLD TEACHERS' DAY

Build the future: Invest in teachers now

This year, World Teachers' Day focuses on the role of teachers within the context of the global financial and economic crisis and the need to invest in teachers now as a means to secure post-crisis regeneration.

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

TEACHERS, since 1994, have observed World Teachers' Day on October 5. The aim is to mobilise support for teachers and ensure that the needs of future generations continue to be met by teachers. According to Unesco, World Teachers' Day represents the awareness, understanding and appreciation displayed for the vital contribution that teachers make to education and development.

In Bangladesh, the National Front of Teachers and Employees (NFTE), the largest united platform of eleven associations and unions representing half a million teachers and education employees who serve in about 30 thousand educational institutions, observes the day through rallies, discussion meetings, and distribution of printed articles and write-ups highlighting teachers' status, dignity and role in improving the standard of education.

This year the NFTE has drawn up a new program for the 64 administrative districts of the country, paying respect to elderly and retired teachers who contributed to education as teachers and textbook writers.

This year, World Teachers' Day puts the spotlight on the global teacher shortage and the challenges of being a teacher today. In our rapidly changing and interdependent world, teachers have to ensure that students not only acquire solid skills in basic subjects, but also become responsible local and global citizens, at ease with new technologies, and able to make informed decisions

about healthcare, the environment and other challenges.

It is relevant to point out that sustained investment is required to develop a well-trained and motivated teaching force. It is critical that governments support the recruitment, training and professional development of teachers. These concerns are reflected in this year's main theme: "Build the future: invest in teachers now!"

October 5 is a day of celebration for the teaching community throughout the globe in view of Unesco's adoption of the recommendations concerning the status of teachers at a special intergovernmental conference in Paris on that day in 1966, which were later approved by ILO. The recommendations are immensely important due to their wide ranging significance and implications in regard to educators in particular and education in general.

Four of its salient features are:

- Since education is a service of fundamental importance, it should be recognised as a responsibility of the state;
- Teachers' organisations should be recognised as a force which can contribute greatly to educational advancement and which, therefore, should be associated with the determination of education policy;
- Since education is an essential factor in economic growth, educational planning should form an integral part of total economic and social planning undertaken to improve living conditions;
- Teachers' salaries should: i) reflect the

importance to society of the teaching function and hence the importance of teachers; ii) compare favourably with salaries paid in other occupations requiring similar or equivalent qualifications; iii) provide teachers with the means to ensure a reasonable standard of living for themselves and their families as well as to invest in further education or in the pursuit of cultural activities thus enhancing their professional qualification.

Since 1994, the Bangladesh College Teachers' Association (BCTA) and Bangladesh Federation of Teachers Associations (BFTA) have initiated and pioneered the observation of this day. This year, the National Front of Teachers & Employees (NFTE) has drawn some new programs. However, World Teachers' Day, 2009 has a new perspective in Bangladesh. Within a short time of the formation of the new government, an eighteen-member National Education Policy Formulation Committee was formed.

The Committee has already submitted its report, which includes, among other aspects, recommendations to enhance teachers' salaries, status and dignity, as well as their pre-service and in-service training, regularly update the curriculum, put stress on science and job-oriented technical and vocational education, introduce common core subjects in all strata of education, in both Bengali and English medium schools, establish an equivalent number of technical and vocational schools and madrasas, and enact service conditions for education employees.

It is heartening to note that the present government has enhanced the salaries of non-government primary teachers, keeping their pay at par with the basic pay of government primary teachers. Non-government school, college, madrasa and vocational institution teachers will also be included in the new national pay scale, as per an

announcement made by the education minister. All these positive steps and approaches, however, neither mitigates nor solves all the chronic professional and academic ailments accumulated over the years.

But the positive trend on the part of the present government indicates that it has started a process of dialogue and consultation with teachers' organisations on matters of education and issues that concern teachers and education employees. The Non-Government Teachers & Employees Welfare Trust Fund Committee and Teachers & Employees Retirement Benefit Board have already been reconstituted.

Yet, in spite of these positive approaches from the government, seventy thousand teachers and employees are on the waiting list to receive their due salaries. The time/promotion scale which teachers received at the end of two and eight years, discontinued by the earlier government, is yet to be resumed, though a high-powered committee headed by the prime minister's adviser on education, social development and political affairs, Professor Dr. Alauddin Ahmed, and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on education have already recommended it.

It is a day to celebrate teachers and the central role they play in guiding children, youth and adults through a life-long learning process. This year, World Teachers' Day focuses on the role of teachers within the context of the global financial and economic crisis and the need to invest in teachers now as a means to secure post-crisis regeneration. All concerned, from top to bottom, should recognise that it is the teaching force with its knowledge, experience and foresight that can bring new insight into global solutions.

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Internal issues need fixing

When the world is talking about new ties between Bangladesh and the US, it is the most opportune time to address the key internal issues and place Bangladesh as a nation "ready to deliver" with the "homework" done, at least this time.

MAMUN RASHID

ACCORDING to various media sources, political and foreign relations analysts at home and abroad have described Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to the United States, in connection with the UN General Assembly session, a wonderful achievement for the country's foreign policy and foreign affairs management. Many have said that the rapport developed with the world's most influential country, through a series of interactions in a brief period, has warmed Dhaka-Washington ties, particularly when US foreign policy is going through a series of changes under the Obama Administration.

This writer's interactions with US State Department officials home and abroad also carry enough testimony with regards to providing space to the new government in Bangladesh. This is obviously an achievement for the present government, which is focused on global issues like climate change impact, rapid increase of cross-border terrorism and corruption. Besides, our exports to the US and the rest of the world, along with inward remittances, are holding up pretty well despite the global meltdown.

As much as we welcome these achieve-

ments, we must also remember that in a constantly shifting geo-political environment, maintaining a long-term external relationship also calls for continuous and constant engagement. The United States and the world outside have taken Bangladesh into cognisance because of the visible change in American foreign policy under Obama, and last year's highly credible and landmark general elections in Bangladesh. This is an opportunity for Bangladesh, and we must seize it by rapid development on the domestic front, and also by not attracting headlines for the wrong reasons. As many would agree, there are a few domestic issues the government needs to address immediately.

First of all, the government needs to improve the general law and order situation significantly. In recent times, this situation has worsened considerably, putting a question mark even on democracy (!). Unfortunately, the perception about the country's law and order situation has worsened more than the actual situation. This is also being fuelled by uncontrolled extortion by leaders of ruling party student fronts and associate organisations. Anti-social miscreants are creating horror in public life and earning a bad name for the government. The

government bureaucracy is hesitant and not focused enough to handle these issues with determination. As a result, the overall investment climate also remains bleak.

The banking sector is flushed with huge liquidity. A fall of interest among investors to commit to further expansion is alarming. There is a gradual fear creeping into the business community that Bangladesh will be vulnerable toward the end of the global recession. The government needs to take effective steps to eradicate the business community's fear, show business-friendly intentions and make some quick decisions to regain confidence of investors. Foreign investors operating in the country and interested in exploring opportunities here need to be brought into confidence too. They must be able to appreciate that they are not unwelcome here. Projects must be awarded to competent institutions with a proven delivery track record, not to those that are close to the regime or higher-ups.

The ongoing crisis of energy and infrastructure needs to be addressed immediately. The government should take planned and defined steps to develop the infrastructure, the lack of which is not only causing domestic industries to suffer but also keeping away a lot of foreign investment. Bangladesh will need an investment of \$2.4 billion to build the infrastructure to effectively join the Asian Highway network, including transit to India, which would link Bulgaria in Europe to the Philippines in Southeast Asia, according to a study by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Funding for this project is also a key issue,

along with other issues being discussed for infrastructure development. It is, possibly, not only an issue of importing more furnace oil to support non gas-based power plants, but also of the importance of the furnace oil reaching the plant, and of providing storage facilities closer to the plants.

The viability of public and private partnership also needs to be assessed. Energy problems, particularly the electricity crisis and potential crisis of gas, must be addressed with a comprehensive program, along with the development of alternate energy sources, a workable distribution network and storage facilities.

We don't have time to play the blame game; rather, the limited time and resources we have must be used wisely to meet the demand for energy. When the possibility of a double dip recession is being discussed, all our efforts must be given to protect and groom the industries that have acted as a backbone for our national economy, not necessarily only agriculture.

Bangladesh has always had an image management problem. The potential we have as a country has always been underestimated by the outside world -- we are also responsible for that. Substandard management of our country's image cannot be an option. When the world is talking about new ties between Bangladesh and the US, it is the most opportune time to address the key internal issues and place Bangladesh as a nation "ready to deliver" with the "homework" done, at least this time.

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Embedded danger

This foreign assistance, as all assistance does, comes at a price, and the price is the abdication of much of our sovereignty and control over the security situation in Mindanao.

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THE death of two American soldiers in Sulu last Tuesday refocuses the nation's attention on the need to revisit the Visiting Forces Agreement. The agreement has been so loosely interpreted by both the Philippine and American governments as to provide carte blanche for US forces to engage in operations never contemplated by the Senate (and the public) when it was asked to give consent for the agreement.

It essentially allows the Americans to undertake military operations in tandem with members of the armed forces of the Philippines, under the camouflage of training activities.

The US government is fully capable of assessing the danger posed to their investments, and the tens of thousands of people with US citizenship who reside in the country, by the activities being under-

taken by their troops.

What remains to be answered is whether our own government has carefully thought-out the implications of its permissiveness.

Our government's policy, particularly since it embarked on tying itself to the Bush administration's apron-strings after September 11, then cut those strings in a panic in Iraq, has been to compensate the Americans by essentially giving them a free hand in Mindanao.

Asean basically wants this too, as governments in the region, such as Malaysia, Australia and Indonesia, have a low opinion of Filipino capability in securing Mindanao and the terrorist networks that find refuge there. And the Philippine government wants it because it is unable to achieve either a military or political solution to the cases of conflict in Mindanao.

This quid pro quo permits the government to eke out aid from the Americans, and our officialdom's lapses in bringing devel-

opment to Muslim Mindanao in particular, where its political alliances with warlords matters more than giving our Moro brethren opportunities to improve their lives, can be compensated, at least partially, by foreign assistance.

This foreign assistance, as all assistance does, comes at a price, and the price is the abdication of much of our sovereignty and control over the security situation in Mindanao. It comes at the price of an agreement intended, officially speaking, to beef up our armed forces by giving them access to training with friendly forces. It comes at the price of a constitution observed more in the breach by keeping a round-the-clock foreign military presence here while skirting the basic law's actual provisions on the conditions that should apply for such a presence.

The Americans have been effective in putting a lid on things, but medals and citations have been issued since the Bush administration to servicemen and officers wounded in actual encounters with rebels and terrorists in Mindanao.

American troops are not sheltered in training camps or simply directing spy drones to provide intelligence to Filipino troops. Far more than will ever be officially acknowledged, there's a close coordination

down to the patrol level between Filipino and American soldiers.

This makes the Americans a target for forces fighting our government's troops, and it puts US troops in many combat or near-combat situations. We only have to point to the case of Americans firing their weapons when an explosion rocked the pier in Jolo some weeks ago. And now comes the death of the two American soldiers together with a Philippine Marine.

As the Americans focus on the offensive in Afghanistan, sympathetic groups will try to take the edge off the attacks on al-Qaeda and the Taliban by mounting attacks on American troops and civilians everywhere else around the world.

Unless our government begins by re-examining the VFA, this situation will only continue as an irritant in RP-US relations. It will bring back the spectre of the Philippines becoming part of the front line in the confrontation between the terrorist organisation and the West.

And considering the motivations of our government, it means the country is increasing its risks for all the wrong, because mainly mercenary, reasons.

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