

## Home Minister's explanation of 'crossfire' killings untenable

*The nation demands an end to extra-judicial deaths*

WE are indeed shocked by Home Minister Sahara Khatun's assertion that there have been no 'crossfire' killings under the present government. The shock takes an even more acute form when she describes all the killings that have gone on as acts of self-defence on the part of the security forces. We would like to point out here, in the clearest and most unambiguous manner, that in the past many years these deaths from so-called crossfires have given the country a bad name. What now makes these deaths extremely regrettable is the fact that the Awami League, before it rode to power at the general elections a year ago, had strongly made clear its opposition to 'crossfire' deaths and had indeed pledged to put an end to them.

Obviously, there has been a backsliding on the issue. More pertinently, it appears that the government has been speaking in different voices on the subject. Not long ago, the shipping minister surprised all of us when he asserted that 'crossfire' killings would help restore law and order. Then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stepped in, through informing a foreign delegation calling on her that her government was opposed to all extra-judicial deaths. And now comes this fresh new comment from none other than the home minister. Let us be very specific here: Sahara Khatun's defence of 'crossfire' deaths as deaths occurring in self-defence on the part of the security forces is untenable for two reasons. In the first place, only because an individual in high authority says there have been no 'crossfire' deaths is no cause to accept it as the unfettered truth. In the second, all these deaths have mostly occurred after the law enforcers reportedly accompanied the victims, moments before their deaths, to various places in search of their accomplices who, it has regularly been said, opened fire on the security forces. The forces fired back and in all that 'crossfire' the arrestees lost their lives. Intriguingly, not one among the accomplices was nabbed or killed and neither was any bodily injury caused to any member of the security forces. No government, not this one, not the caretaker administration, not the BNP-led one before that, has ever been able to explain away this gap in information.

We are afraid the home minister's defence of 'crossfire' killings can now only embolden those who have been indulging in such extra-judicial murder and thereby open new avenues for them to justify such killings. One may point out here that around the world suspected criminals are regularly nabbed by the law enforcing agencies, but how many instances are there of arrested individuals dying in police custody or of security personnel firing back at shadowy or non-existent criminal elements in self-defence?

All that the nation wants is an immediate end to such killings. Unless reassurances followed by concrete action on such an issue of grave public concern come from the government, there is the danger of the law and human rights becoming casualties in a country whose people happen to be struggling for the creation of a viable democratic society. The rule of law must prevail, due process of law fully observed. There can be no alternative to civilised behaviour.

## Acid violence more rampant than reported

*Concern only grows, determined action on the ground awaited*

A national dialogue focused on open market acid sell in Bangladesh organised by ActionAid on Sunday ended up being a fairly comprehensive discourse on acid violence. It has not only been a revealing statistical update but also a fairly diagnostic analysis suggesting some antidotes worth applying against the social malady. The statistics are simply hair-raising: we have it on the authority of the executive director of Acid Survivors' Foundation that 3,000 cases of acid-related violence were reported during last 10 years in the country. This works out to an average of almost one victim per day. But these are reported incidents, and with the unreported ones added, the magnitude is simply appalling! Yet the more horrific reality is that only 10 percent of perpetrators ever get punished.

So while we hear of government initiatives to amend the Acid Crime Prevention Act and the Acid Control Act, both of 2002, it appears that it is not so much a question of giving more teeth to the laws as it is of implementing and enforcing them.

The pervasive nature of the crime can be gauged from the fact that now even men are becoming victims of it, mostly over land disputes and other forms of enmity. The ratio between women and men victims is 65:35.

Why this growing incidence of acid violence? The prime cause we believe is the unrestricted availability and sale of acid in the open but so-called black market. There are supposed to be listed users of acid, such as handloom, jewelry, pharmaceutical, carpentry-related trades etc but it so happens that not all of them are registered; in fact, most of them are not. Unless these are registered and there are some effective ways of monitoring acid purchase, use and sale, no control can be exercised at the roots of the problem. We would, therefore, endorse the view of experts that it should be mandatory on the part of such trades to be registered.

Aside from monitored availability of acid and enforcement of law at that point to punish the offenders, what we think can also be a powerful antidote is stepping up the excruciatingly slow pace of case disposal which allows for manipulation and maneuvering by the perpetrators to escape justice. The rate of conviction must be markedly higher to have any deterrent effect. The legal procedures may have also to be adjusted to the reality of witnesses being diffident to come forward for the prosecution.

## The politics of unending surprises

A year after the general elections, the lights are going out. Partisan politics, vicious in form, gains ground by the day. The man or woman who will unify the country, who will be the symbol of national unity, is a dream not about to take the shape of reality.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE is no end to the surprises that our politicians keep piling on our doorsteps. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which has never seen any reason to say sorry for its bad governance between 2001 and 2006, now has happily made it known to the country that henceforth Begum Khaleda Zia will be its chairperson without anyone being able to challenge her on the leadership question. The amended party constitution makes this much obvious.

But, of course, if there is any question about a succession, there is her elder child to take charge of the organisation. That is also something the party, with the nod of all its grandees, has cheerfully agreed to. To what degree such a political strategy will add flesh to democracy in the country is now the huge question before us. Let it be known, for now, that the nation is not pleased.

There is something here that reminds you of the Bhuttos in Pakistan. Two years ago, after Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Rawalpindi, her family made it known that she had left the Pakistan People's Party in the care of her son and

her husband. Now the husband, certainly possessed of a dubious character, struggles to deflect the demands for his resignation from the presidency in light of the Supreme Court ruling annulling the notorious National Reconciliation Ordinance. And the young son, still at Oxford, prepares to take over Pakistan sometime in the not-too-distant future.

That, of course, depends on what the Pakistan state meanwhile does to keep itself going, seeing that it has the Taliban to contend with and the American drone flights to put an end to if it means to remain a sovereign state.

But turn back to Bangladesh, to the surprises it is regularly pelted with. Who would have known, back in 1971, that the Jamaat-e-Islami would nearly forty years down the road jolt us into an awareness of its own "dedication" to the cause of Bengali freedom? The party which so cheerfully assisted the Pakistan occupation army through forming such murder squads as the Razakars, al Badr and al Shams, has now "honoured" five freedom fighters.

Miracles, especially those of a sinister hue, never cease. And here where you have everything being readied for a trial

of war criminals, you note that a party which so vociferously defended the murky cause of Pakistan during the War of Liberation now throws wool over our eyes through informing us that it has its own band of freedom fighters who served the cause in 1971.

But it is not merely the BNP and the Jamaat, which have been weighing us down with surprises. Observe the very establishmentarian nature of the comments Sahara Khatun has been making in recent days. A good many weeks after Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan's defence of "crossfire" killings, the home minister enlightens us with news that under the year-old Awami League government, there have been no "crossfire" killings in Bangladesh. Do you see how the facts fly in the face of such assertions?

As many as a hundred and twenty three individuals died in these outrageous "crossfire" killings this year alone. But, of course, the minister would have us know that those who were shot down were men who had fired at the security forces who, in turn, had acted in self-defence. Ah, but here again is that old question from us: How is it that no one among the security forces has ever borne the mark of any injury and how is it that those murdered in "crossfires" have always breathed their last on open fields in some rural setting or the other?

Politics is dragged through mud and slime when Sajeda Chowdhury, once a minister and now deputy leader of the House in Parliament, raises the mischie-

vous question of what Begum Zia does at her party office in the late hours. You would have expected better behaviour and more edifying utterances from one who has had such a long career in politics. Ms. Chowdhury's comments have made the Awami League go red in the face. And it has left citizens across the spectrum wallowing in undying shame. Why do politicians like Sajeda Chowdhury not remember that people have long memories, that they remember, that there is the next election to be fought in four years' time?

If Sahara Khatun and Sajeda Chowdhury have been embarrassing the country, Syed Ashrafur Islam has not remained far behind. The local government minister chooses not to speak on his ministry or on his party, but focuses instead on the new Hawa Bhaban he thinks will mutate out of the BNP office in Gulshan. He dwells on the grave damage to be done to politics if Tarique Rahman re-enters the scene. Must he go into all that? Should he be presuming what the BNP will or will not be doing? Must ministerial dignity be stripped away in such cavalier fashion?

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## One year of AL-led government

This is the beginning and not the end of this regime. It has been able to overcome the initial problems and hurdles. It is on the right track. It will certainly gain momentum within a short time, because it is trying sincerely to fulfill its election commitments.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

ONE year's performance is not enough to evaluate the achievement of a regime that is to continue for 5 years. Furthermore, the present elected government assumed power from a government without accountability. It appears to be proper to consider the following points before analysing the present activities in the light of its election commitments.

The points are:

- Shocks received by the AL activists during the so-called interim govt. (2007-08),
- Global economic meltdown,
- Highly politicised bureaucracy, and
- Failure to determine the right size of administration by the past government (1991-2006).

The AL-led government started its work with highly ambitious programs, but without a vision no nation can achieve

prosperity. Even though Bangladesh is a resource-poor country, we can still attain our objective with sincere, honest and dedicated leadership.

The present government started with a cabinet composed mainly of rather new and inexperienced members. Such a situation resulted in creation of too much pressure on the prime minister. Needless to say, apart from being the chief of the party she is also shouldering the heavy responsibility of running the administration. We may say that she has performed rather well in the one year that she has been in power. This goes to her credit.

Additionally, we need to mention the remarkable successes of some ministries. Among them are the ministries of finance, agriculture and education. As for the ministry of finance, a special mention may be made about the successful presentation of a quality budget, encouraging revenue collection (more than 14% increase), reducing the amount of gov-

ernment borrowing and higher repayment of the borrowed amount, effective subsidies for food production and major export commodities.

Regarding the ministry of agriculture, extreme efficiency in solving the various problems of the farmers and crop sharers deserve high commendation. Issuance of farmer identity cards will be another good step. For the first time in the history of Bangladesh, the ministry of education has been able to earn a good name due to the courage shown in implementing the recommendations of the Kabir Chowdhury Commission.

The introduction of board examinations for primary students is certainly a revolutionary step taken by the government. The way the examination was handled, and the results announced, was outstanding.

The performance of the ministries of commerce, food, foreign affairs, roads and highways, industry is not so satisfactory, because they are either too slow or lack proper coordination. Some analysts suggest review of some projects that are being implemented too slowly.

Even if some ministries cannot show enough competence, we should try to appreciate them if they are making sincere efforts. It would be necessary to restart the

projects unfinished during AL's previous regime (1996-2001), and discontinued by the 4-party regime (2001-06), in the interest of better utilisation of public money. After all, our priority is sound execution of good quality projects.

The overall achievement of the first year of the regime may be considered as satisfactory. It is true that the present government is striving hard to tackle the problems, and is on the right track. It is encouraging to see the positive response of our multilateral donors and friendly countries and the signs of recovery from the current global economic crisis. Although we may not see much new investment, with the improvement of our infra-structural facilities this will improve soon.

This is the beginning and not the end of this regime. It has been able to overcome the initial problems and hurdles. It is on the right track. It will certainly gain momentum within a short time, because it is trying sincerely to fulfill its election commitments. With the passage of time the new and inexperienced ministers will do well because they are committed. We hope to see successful completion of the commitments of the government by the end of the regime.

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## Chancellor Angela Merkel's political woes

Merkel's supporters are concerned about the growing perception of her lack of leadership and direction. One analyst says that Merkel prefers to moderate rather than lead, especially when the coalition is being pulled in many ways on how to deal with the economic crisis. For the first time since 2005, she is facing rebellion within.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE election on September 27 in Germany gave Chancellor Angela Merkel a resounding victory for her dream Centre-Right coalition. She first became the chancellor in 2005.

The three parties of the Left -- Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens -- saw their combined votes slip from 51% to 45.6%.

People expect that Merkel will take this great opportunity to undertake reforms in the country and to show leadership.

In spite of the victory of her dream-coalition of conservatives and the pro-business Free Democrats there is now great disappointment among the public, partly because of in-fighting among coalition parties and partly because of her lack of direction.

The Free Democrats want to quickly introduce lower taxes and reforms but her party is divided over the issue. The Free Democrats want a simplified tax system and cut in the top rate from 50% to 35%.

On December 18, Merkel, reportedly under pressure, cut taxes worth \$1.2 trillion for families, including big tax breaks for hotels. These tax benefits have

become deeply unpopular with the public because Germany needs savings and not tax cuts during the global economic recession.

Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble is the only one taking about a radical savings plan. It appears that Merkel has left it to her finance minister to explain the parlous state of Germany's finances.

The Free Democrats also want to unravel health reforms by opening up the market for private medical insurers and argue against Merkel's plans to expand the powers of the domestic intelligence service. Equally, there is tension over the Free Democrats' desire to wind back anti-terrorism surveillance.

In foreign policy, the new government is expected to adopt a more assertive role in the world. Currently, there is little to boast about in foreign policy.

Her role in the recent Copenhagen Climate Change conference is widely seen as a failure because Denmark has taken the initiative in combating the effects of climate change, although in 2005 Merkel made climate change as one of her major policy themes.

Gerhard Hirscher, a political analyst at the conservative-affiliated Hanns Seidel Foundation in Munich, says: "It is as if

Ms. Merkel has lost interest in foreign policy."

Afghanistan is the biggest foreign policy headache because the German public do not approve of keeping their troops in the war-torn zone. Furthermore, the German commander had caused an uproar in September when he was responsible for the deaths of 142 people, including civilians, in Kunduz (Afghanistan) because he ordered Nato aircraft to bomb two "hijacked" tankers. Now both Merkel and her defence minister Guttenberg may face unpleasant questions by a special parliamentary inquiry committee.

The defence ministry's perceived "deception" about the extent of German involvement in the war has already led to the resignations of the former defence minister, the top commander and a leading official. Pressure is mounting on Merkel and the new defence minister to reveal precisely how much they knew and when about the Kunduz incident.

This matters greatly because two-thirds of voters are dissatisfied with Germany's role, even if it is presented as peacekeeping rather than involvement in a war -- still a taboo in political discourse. Merkel can expect little help from opposition parties in making a choice between deeper involvement in, or gradual withdrawal from, Afghanistan.

Against this background, when President Obama wanted to know whether Germany would send additional troops to Afghanistan, it is understandable that Merkel avoided giving a response. She has kept the US administration waiting.

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of leadership and direction. One analyst says that Merkel prefers to moderate rather than lead, especially when the coalition is being pulled in many ways on how to deal with the economic crisis. For the first time since 2005, she is facing rebellion within.

Naturally, Merkel wants her conservative party (Christian Democratic Union) to avoid defeat in regional elections next year. But the warning from Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble that drastic budget cuts will be needed next year foreshadows bitter political rows within and without government.

Having consolidated her leadership by cautious and artful compromise in her first term as German chancellor, Chancellor Merkel is finding the going harder only months after her solid victory in September's elections. Along with difficult choices on economic policy with her Free Democrats coalition partners, she faces a growing crisis on Germany's role in Afghanistan. Voters and political colleagues alike complain they are unsure about her real objectives.

This has emboldened the opposition Social Democrats, and competing with a stronger Left Party has left Merkel little room for maneuver.

It is noted that the outcome of the last election has split the Germans -- between Right and Left. The combined Social Democrats and its Left allies won 46% of the popular votes while the party of the Chancellor and its allies won 48%. Under these circumstances, Angela Merkel is likely to face political hurdles in the months ahead.

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