

Govt action plans

We commend the move

WE are heartened to learn of the government's plans, in light of the agreement reached between the government and the development partners at the recently concluded Bangladesh Development Forum, to move ahead with 26 action plans aimed at improving governance and making more effective use of donor assistance.

For too long there has been a mismatch between the amount of money the development partners have pledged every year as assistance and the government's capacity to utilise the funds in an expedient and efficient manner.

In truth, the problem has always been lack of proper planning and commitment to make the government apparatus operate more smoothly, and this is why the 26 action plans set forth by the government are so crucial and how they represent a bold new direction for the government.

Almost as important as the action plans, the government has also unveiled an initiative to work closely with the development partners to draw up a joint cooperation strategy. Again, such an initiative is long overdue and extremely welcome. Closer coordination with the development partners is indispensable for ensuring the quick and effective use of foreign assistance.

These moves to make government more effective and to enhance efficiency are to be applauded. We are glad to see the government taking such mature and practical steps in order to ensure sounder governance and as smooth cooperation as possible with the development partners.

The government's plans will not only ensure more effective use of foreign assistance, as intended, but will also help to ensure that all government services are delivered in a more efficient manner and that all government revenue is more better and more quickly utilised.

We also approve the focus on accountability and transparency that has been laid out, and are gratified to note that the initiative envisages a situation whereby both the government and the development partners can hold one another more accountable.

This kind of partnership and cooperation is long overdue, and we hope that we will now see a real improvement in the government's ability to absorb donor assistance, and we expect that this will have positive ripple effects throughout the government machinery as well as the development partners' response mechanisms.

One year since the carnage

The nation awaits completion of trial and BDR reorganisation

FEBRUARY 25 saddens us greatly, as it brings back memories of 75 persons including 57 army officers, having been killed under most unfortunate circumstances at the BDR Headquarters just a year ago. It was a rude shock for all of us, leaving the whole nation numbed with a sense of inconsolable grief. The slain officers were unarmed and killed in the line of duty. Even their families were not spared as the mutineers engaged in a frenzied, brutal action.

A fair and speedy trial of the killers is what everybody demanded. The trial has begun and it is expected that justice will be meted out to all. One cannot be oblivious of the fact that national security was badly compromised when the border sentinels attacked the army officers.

The government on that fateful day was faced with the uphill task of disarming the mutineers while keeping the casualties at a minimum.

It is the very nature of the crime committed at the BDR Headquarters that gave rise to so many questions in the public mind. A sense of insecurity and helplessness prevailed for quite some time as the news came that the army officers had been gunned down. It cast an ominous shadow over the nation as people began to think about national security.

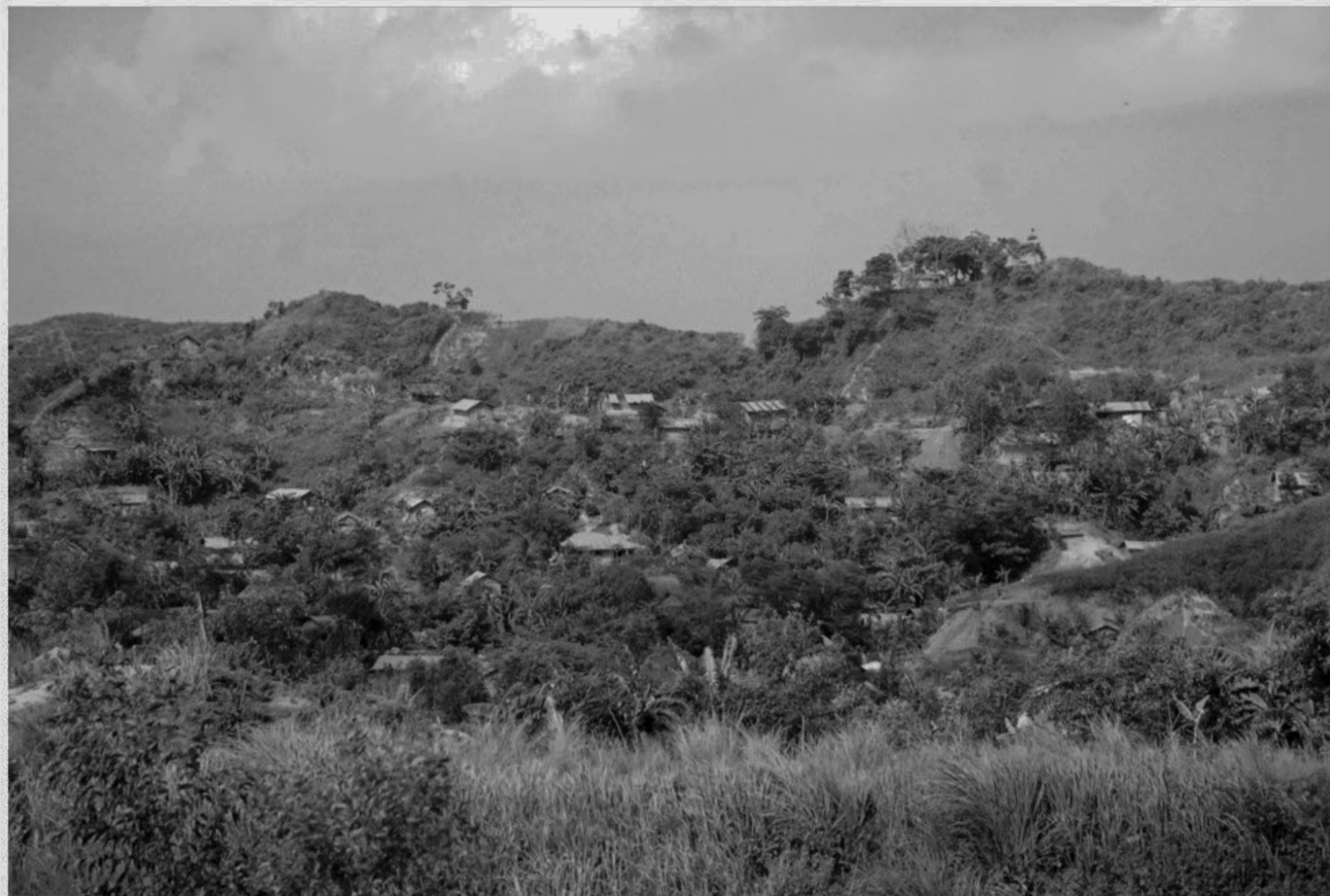
The nation is determined to see that such a breakdown of discipline and frenzied killing never happen again. The need of the hour is to reorganise the BDR with a view to making it fully functional, disciplined and capable of accomplishing the task assigned to it. Simultaneously, we believe the intelligence services are being reorganised.

Ideas have been floated as to how best the border security forces can be reorganised. Obviously, the para-military force patrolling our borders should be restructured on the basis of a model suited to our needs.

A fair trial will bring some solace to the families of the victims, although their losses are irreparable. Importantly, it will validate once again the old saying that crime does not pay.

Ominous signs in the hills

What we see happening in the CHT is not only disturbing, it also portends sinister development in the area in the future, if not addressed immediately. Everything boils down to the question of why it has not been possible to execute all the points in the accord.



SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE recent clashes in Baghaichari in Rangamati and Khagrachari are not a law and order issue and would need more than investment of security forces to quell the situation. It has to do primarily with the way progress has been made in implementing the CHT Accord. It will be fair to say that in the 12 years of its signing till 2009, which includes more than four years of the AL rule, and the five years of the BNP's, except for some superficial actions, very little worth the mention has been done.

From time to time through this column we have been trying to underscore the dangers if the state did not, or could not, deliver completely and timely on its commitment to the people. And when there is

inordinate delay or the main party resorts to subterfuge and excuses in fulfilling the provisos of an agreement disappointment is bound to manifest, and it does so in many forms. We Bengalis tend to forget the position we were in not long ago and what our reaction was to the Pakistan government not living up to its promises.

As for the current spate of violence in the area, there is very little doubt that whatever may be the immediate cause of the recent clashes, the Tribal-Bengali divide, as well as parochial positions on the Accord of different groups, has been exploited by the vested elements with ulterior motives. An unstable CHT perhaps serves their purpose.

What long years of lack of serious action in implementing a pledge does is that it

gives time and means to those opposed to it to strengthen their position to derail the plans. And that is what the long 13 years interregnum, between signing of the agreement and now, has done. Those tribal groups opposed to the CHT Accord have got plenty of fodder to depict the non-fulfillment of the agreement, for whatever reasons, as lack of government's honesty



in this regard. Likewise, the Bangalees opposed to the accord have been able to garner more support in the last 13 years for their cause.

What we see happening in the CHT is not only disturbing, it also portends sinister development in the area in the future, if not addressed immediately. Everything boils down to the question of why it has not been possible to execute all the points in the accord? What area the difficulties in implementing those and how can the impediments be removed. And in this regard I, for one, find it difficult to doubt the sincerity of a party that penned the accord, in implementing it.

The AL government since its assumption of office in January 2009 has taken substantive measures to start the process

of implementation. However, it should be abundantly clear that all the provisions of the accord cannot be fulfilled overnight, like the work of the land commission, and some of the provisions may need a re-look at the constitution. And this is where the government has not been proactive enough, to identify the possible impediments and devise ways to overcome them.

We all have a stake in permanent peace in the hills. It must be admitted that both the parties in the accord have displayed great deal of flexibility in arriving at an understanding. The original demand of self-rule had been toned down by the PCJSS although not to the satisfaction of all the tribal groups; nor have all the clauses of the Accord been acceptable to all the plains people.

However, there are few things that influence positively on the Accord implementation. For one thing, no major political party is opposed to the idea of peace in the CHT, and given that the BNP, in spite of its call to scrap the Accord in 1997, having neither reviewed nor cancelled it during its term of office, has demonstrated its political obligation towards implementing the Accord.

The fact is that all the governments since 1985 had taken initiative for a political solution of the problem, and it just so happened that the regional and international security and geopolitical circumstances worked towards arriving at a compact in 1997. While nobody should claim exclusivity of the credit of the Peace Accord, on the contrary it would be to discredit of all if it were to fall through.

One thing must be made abundantly clear to all which is that the solution does not lie in taking up arms, as some tribal student leaders were seen threatening to do recently, or by use of force. And if Mr. Shantu Larma has been threatening to take to the hills, from time to time since 2004, it is only to be expected because it his credibility as a leader that will be at stake if the compact falls through.

And it must be made clear too that there is no alternative but to implement the agreement. If there is need for a review, it should only be done with the participation of all the stakeholders. There is more than personal credibility that is at stake.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, pscd (Retd) The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Who will keep us safe?

Even though it still feels too early to do anything other than grieve the 57 army officers and 13 civilians who died, I want to use this anniversary to think a bit about what it means to be safe in this city of ours.

SHAHEEN ISLAM

AN unexpected burst of violence engulfed Dhaka a year ago. Of all the events in the past decade that have caused collective grief to this city and damaged its social fabric -- serial bomb blasts, violent strikes, *logi-boitha*, the Dhaka University student-military face-off -- this was the worst. Make no mistake about that.

I will not -- I emphasise, *not* -- attempt to explore the root causes, deep conspiracies and national/international forces behind the BDR mutiny. Nor will I discuss the question that has joined the other great what ifs in our history: whether negotiations on the first day, instead of the military solution, were a mistake or not. I am sure the discerning reader will find enough in the media about those. Rather, even though it still feels too early to do anything other than grieve the 57 army officers and 18 civilians who died, I want to use this anniversary to think a bit about what it means to be safe in this city of ours.

The trauma is still fresh for a lot of us. Even now, I find myself unable to grasp the magnitude of what happened that day and of the brutality inside Pilkhana. It all goes through my head as a series of very disturbing images -- the last of which is always that of people holding handkerchiefs to their noses as mass graves were unearthed. A senior blogger friend wrote it thus: never thought we would have to re-visit that spectacle in independent Bangladesh.

Of course, instead of prompting the nation-wide soul-search to ask ourselves "What have we become," we quickly saw different interest groups use the event to target their favourite *bête noire*: AL and BNP blamed each other and each others' alleged international patrons; "communal fundamentalists" blamed "atheist intellectuals" and got blamed in turn; and the army blamed the media and, privately, the politicians. The only sur-

prise was they also blamed their chief -- poetic, despite having the semblance of poetic justice, was unfair.

But within those disturbing images, a few bright spots come to mind.

There was the soldier who broke down in tears after seeing the graves. Seeing that picture on the front page was cathartic, and I am grateful to him for taking my own grief and crystallising it. Indeed, I felt a gratitude to our soldiers in a way I never had previously. They did their duty when their compatriots forgot ours. And on that day, crying on behalf of the nation was added to their list of duties.

Then there were our firefighters and divers. Anyone who saw the images of those men go down the drains underneath Pilkhana or dig up those graves to unearth disfigured bodies could not help but notice how severely under-equipped they were for the task they were called on to perform. It was sad, but they did their duty and did so without complaint.

One of the less exciting questions that needs to be asked in the aftermath is this: What does it mean to be safe and who keeps us safe?

I would argue that the trials and tribulations of everyday life have a greater impact on our security than the larger geopolitical issues with which the term "security" is usually associated.

I would argue that we do not spend enough on civil defence -- that is, on our fire-fighters, river police and, yes, our metropolitan police. These are the people who keep us safe on a daily basis.

And I would argue that we do not put enough effort into easing the inevitable social frictions and stresses that will result in a densely populated country -- and an even denser city -- like ours.

That last is terribly important and the most difficult to address. Every act of violence and murder in the city tears asunder the basic social contract that enables us to co-habit this little stretch of land between the Buriganga and the Turag. Without that contract, under



which my neighbour and I try to settle our disagreements without violence, not even the best-funded police force will be able to keep us safe.

The more I try to understand why the BDR *jawans* resorted to violence that day, the more I believe they simply learned from the rest of us. Every time a traffic police wields a stick on a rickshawala, every time a basket-carrying child is hit by a truck driver in Karwan Bazar, every murder committed for *netri/madam* or "the cause," every time we burn down our neighbour's home because they look different and live differently from us, every time a "domestic" is hit by the employers, every time the police tortures the remanded, we are pushing the envelope just a little bit more on the acceptable level of violence against our neighbours and citizens.

Until, one day, it becomes acceptable to kill people we have fought side-by-side with in remote locations and tarnish a century-old heritage of service.

And over what? Yeah, you guessed it -- money or, as it turned out, the rumour of it.

But I suppose we can leave these concerns in limbo for another year and hope that, in the meantime, the different groups across all our social divides decide to mourn with the grieving families with dignity and silence. Instead, I fear we will not learn from Pilkhana, and many more unfounded accusations will fly and much more violence will ensue, serving no purpose but to increase the gulf between us.

Shaheen Islam is blogger who was born and raised in Dhaka.