

## Restoring normal conditions in the hills

*An atmosphere of confidence must be created*

HERE is yet a good deal more that must be done for normal conditions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to be restored. News reports of roads and waterways blockades being put up by agitated people (and the latest concerns a group of Bengali settler students) are a huge damper on efforts to restore confidence among the population in Khagrachhari and Rangamati, enough to convince them that they can resume their normal life. At least six people, we understand, have been killed in the violence and scores of arrests have been made. That in itself is a sign of the grave nature of the situation. When you add to that the figures for the number of families affected, 94 in all, and the number of homes razed to the ground, 500 altogether (of which 400 happen to be those of the adivasis), it is easy to imagine the bitterness that must have caused tragedy on such a scale.

The efforts expended by the administration to contain the crisis are appreciable. Yet the fact remains that measures such as an imposition of Section 144 and a clamping of curfew need to be backed up by steps that we can truly regard as constructive engagement where a restoration of peace is concerned. We are a trifle concerned that during his visit to the affected areas on Wednesday, the minister of state for home could not come across many of the adivasis affected by the troubles. They remained in hiding because of twin fears: the first was the fear of being attacked by the settlers and the second was the fear of arrest by the law enforcing agencies. It is these fears that must be addressed swiftly if conditions are not to worsen. In this connection, the administration must convince the adivasis that there will be a fair and impartial inquiry into the crisis and that they can return home without fear of any discrimination. At the same time, the Bengali settlers should also be persuaded to believe that their legitimate interests will be upheld and that only through peaceful accommodation between them and the adivasis will there be peace in the hills. The peace procession led by local lawmaker Jatindral Tripura is a commendable move that should be replicated by others. We suggest that, besides administrative steps toward restoring normalcy, the Jatiya Sangsad could play a major role through having an all-party parliamentary team visit the affected areas not only to study the situation but also to reassure people there that the nation is cognisant of the issues and will handle them to the satisfaction of all. Equally important is the question of engaging the leading lights of the indigenous people in any move toward a resolution of the crisis. The NGOs should be lending a hand in restoring normalcy.

As has been suggested by the local administration, the CHT Land Commission and the CHT Refugee Affairs Task Force should be activated, indeed must become functional if a solution to the crisis is to be arrived at. The on-going conflict in the hills makes it clear why such steps are more in need today than ever before.

## Safety in civic life on decline

*Law enforcers need to pull up their socks*

ON Wednesday a number of mugging incidents occurred in and around the city clearly indicating a spate in crime. These cannot be dismissed as petty offences which is how these are categorised in common parlance. Actually, they are pretty serious, often, life-threatening offences seeing the manner in which these were carried out and their fallout.

What is most brazen-faced about the occurrences is that these are happening in broad daylight and therefore in open defiance of law enforcing authorities. In one incident, the muggers sprayed bullets and exploded bombs to make their get-away with a loot of 30 lakh Taka as the view of the targeted grocery was blocked off by a standing cargo van. Three persons with bullet wounds landed in a hospital. In another occurrence, a house was robbed of the inmates' jewelry including cash, this too in broad daylight. In other separate incidents bus passengers were drugged to fainting and fleeced. Recently there has been a rise in the incidence of snatching and people walking through alleys and passing by desolate corners at night with fear for their life and limbs.

These days the criminals are mostly armed, apt to apply ingenious techniques and blast their way out to safety. The ever newer pastures the criminals are moving on to and their swelling numbers and accessibility to weapons would have to be closely studied, monitored and counter-measures strategised and taken. This is what an appropriate response mechanism should be like: update the lists of criminals, redraw crime zones according to new experiences, arrange frequent patrolling of police; in one word, make the police more visible in the inner city areas, more mobile and equipped. It is common knowledge that the police force is thinly deployed against anti-crime activities as a large chunk of them is devoted to VIP duties and maintaining law and order in a broader sense. Thus there is need for community policing coupled with greater induction of Ansar and VDP as the police: citizen ratio is improved backed by appropriate police reform.

## Fire on the mountain

We need to implement the 1997 CHT accord and we need to rein in the Bengali settlers. Crucially, we need to ensure that the army and the civilian administration protects the rights of all Bangladeshis in the Hill Tracts, not just those of the Bengalis.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

FEBRUARY 21. A red-letter day in Bangladeshi history. The day we Bangladeshis celebrate our language and cultural heritage. The day we remember the four martyrs cut down during the 1952 language movement that was the foundation stone in our struggle for self-determination and the formation of a national identity that culminated in independence in 1971.

Of course the Chakmas and other ethnic minorities in the Hill Tracts and elsewhere in Bangladesh have never really been part of the national narrative. From day one (in fact, their mistreatment pre-dates independence) we have treated them like second-class citizens.

The 1997 peace treaty was supposed to resolve all the simmering tensions and the signing of the accord was a bold and long overdue act of leadership by

and a wrong. It is the settlers who have a history of land-grabbing, who have unleashed a reign of terror in the Hill Tracts, and who are responsible for the lion's share of the violence. Certainly, there have been reprisal attacks on the settlers and certainly Paharis have committed atrocities of their own -- but let us call a spade a spade.

Since independence we have made no efforts to integrate our ethnic minorities into the national project. When he came to power in the mid-70s, military strongman Ziaur Rahman went one step further, initiating a policy of encouraging ethnic Bengalis to settle in CHT in order to actively integrate their lands in CHT with the rest of the country.

Since then, militants waged a low-level insurgency until the 1997 peace

democratic, human, and civil rights. If we had addressed their legitimate grievances, there would have been no insurgency, and if we implement the peace accord, we will have no reason to fear one in future. As recent events have shown, almost all of the unrest in CHT is triggered by attacks by Bengali settlers.

The government must seriously listen to and take concrete steps to address the legitimate grievances of the Paharis. For the local civilian administration and the armed forces to be unable to even keep Paharis safe in their own homes is, at the very least, a shameful dereliction of duty.

The proximity of the violence to February 21 forces one to ask: Is there some connection between our fetishistic glorification of the Bangla language and the short-shrift that non-Bengali ethnic minorities have received in independent Bangladesh?

It's possible. One of the ironies of independence, as historian Afsan Chowdhury once remarked to me, was that we fought a war of independence to create a secular, open, democratic society in which religious and ethnic minorities would have more freedom than in Pakistan.

In the end what we created was a state that has reduced religious and ethnic minorities to second-class citizens due to our linguistic, cultural, and ethnic chauvinism.

This would be more palatable if the chauvinism were a reflection of true pride in our identity and nation. But the truth is the opposite. We have opted for chauvinism and xenophobia in place of self-respect and patriotism as national characteristics. It is the worst of both worlds.

Less than 40 years ago, we fought a war so that as a people we would have the right to determine our own destiny. The price of self-determination is minority protection, and we owe to the nation's ethnic minorities the right to live as free and equal citizens of the republic.

We need to implement the 1997 CHT accord and we need to rein in the Bengali settlers. Crucially, we need to ensure that the army and the civilian administration protects the rights of all Bangladeshis in the Hill Tracts, not just those of the Bengalis.

If we fail in this endeavour and Bangladesh turns into a country with no place for ethnic and religious minorities, it is worth asking the question: Did we really fight a war of independence only to establish a nation for Muslim Bengalis? It would be a shame if it were true.

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Mahajonpara, Khagrachhari, CHT, February 23, 2010.

How better to celebrate and commemorate this flowering of national identity than for Bengali settlers to attack Pahari villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts on the eve of February 21, burning down 200 homes and going on a rampage that ended with at least two Paharis killed and countless others injured and arrested.

the PM back during her first term in office. But the truth of the matter is that the treaty has never been implemented fully by successive governments and the hills have remained a tinderbox of tensions and resentment.

But make no mistake about it: in the battle for control between the Bengali settlers and the Paharis, there is a right

treaty, but the insurgency was never widespread, never had much sympathy among the Pahari people, and never struck terror in the heart of the general population the way that more popular and ruthless insurgencies and movements have done elsewhere.

For the most part, Bangladesh's ethnic minorities have wanted only their

## From signboards to signposts

They teach us that lessons are best learned when they aren't taught at all. Name change doesn't work, because it mutually intimidates. This country urgently needs direction to get out of this mess. About time we switched from signboard to signpost.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WHAT'S in a name?" Juliet asks in Shakespeare's drama. If she were to ask that question to our politicians, their reply would be strikingly opposite of what she tells her lover. A rose doesn't smell as sweet to them when it's called by an opponent's name. As a matter of fact, it stinks when anything is named after him at all. Name is logo to the political brand. In this country, the change of name is the name of change.

The prime minister stated that fact last Friday while she was addressing a party meeting. The BNP regime had changed the names of nearly 250 projects either constructed or initiated during her previous term. She is convinced that a fresh round of renaming should set the record straight. It should teach a lesson so that rival politicians don't make the same mistakes again.

Will that happen? In thirty-nine years, we have seen too many lessons and not enough learning. Names have been renamed before, which is why they are being renamed now. If BNP comes to power, bet your money, the whole funny exercise is going to be repeatedly repeated.

It's strange that in our excitement, we teach others but learn nothing. France's reactionary Bourbon dynasty suffered from the same contradiction. They neither learned nor forgot anything. It goes for our politics with an interesting twist. The opponents should learn everything. We should forget nothing.

This is where lies the secret of our national deadlock. And, I have to tell about a character from Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Funes the Memorious*. A horse

riding accident cripples Funes, and suddenly everything he hears or reads remains etched in his memory. Unable to forget, he eventually succumbs to the burden of remembering.

In our case, that burden is bifurcated. We remember everything the opponents do to us, but forget everything we do to them. And, we do both with equal intensity. Perhaps as a nation we are unable to unwind. We remember to seek revenge, and forget to forgive. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. Revenge for revenge is making us unkind.

At this stage we have no consideration for the country. Modern Greece is an example of how that lack of consideration eventually transmogrifies into politics. The country is deeply paralysed by partisan rivalry. The political class is aware of the country's problems but it does nothing.

So, any reform measure in Greece sparks mass rioting. The land registry system can't be modernised because illegal landowners fight back. The country draws no foreign investment due to high barriers to investment. But these barriers can't be lowered because business is more powerful than politics. Greece today has become a mosh pit of self-interests, its economy squandered.

That is the outcome of divisive politics. In fact, when the old signboard comes down and the new one goes up, it further divides the division. In that fluctuation of change, the country goes out of hand.

Silly, we talk about lessons when there is no learning. Perhaps we are the only nation on earth where politicians are hung up on changing signs. And, the cost of that flip-flop is nobody's worry. One newspa-



Is this the direction we are headed?

per reports that renaming of Zia International Airport alone is going to cost Taka 1,400 crore. Name changing can be an expensive business.

But why does this country incur that cost? Who pays for it? Of course, the cost is borne by the taxpayer. In case we don't know who he is, he's one of us, you and me. Sarojini Naidu once quipped about Gandhi: "Bapu, it costs us a fortune to keep you poor." Likewise, it costs us to keep the leaders in our hearts. But it costs us a lot more to keep them in marquees.

Our politics revolves around that anomaly, renaming the names and naming the renames keeping us busy. In the name of change, the change of names is dividing this country. It's holding us back, because we are conflicted over conflicts.

We don't know what the renaming of the airport is going to achieve. But it was

followed by the prime minister's remark, which casts a long shadow of doubt. A political reconciliation is evermore receding. It looks evermore remote.

Brad Paisley is a white man's singer and many of his fans hadn't voted for Barack Obama. Yet Obama hosted him at the White House in November. Nelson Mandela embraced the sport of rugby to win over the white South Africans. Both presidents reached out to unite their respective people.

They teach us that lessons are best learned when they aren't taught at all. Name change doesn't work, because it mutually intimidates. This country urgently needs direction to get out of this mess. About time we switched from signboard to signpost.

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