

Arrests of J-e-M terrorists

The matter reinforces the need for greater regional cooperation

RECENT arrest of several members of Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist group is very disconcerting indeed. This is the second instance where foreign terrorist organisation members have been apprehended in Bangladesh.

What one can glean from reports so far, the foreign operative was using Bangladesh as a base to conduct terrorist operation in neighbouring countries and to that end he had recruited Bangladeshi nationals. Although four have been arrested in the swoop, one is not sure how many there are in all in the group. Reportedly, one among the arrested is a veteran terrorist, having served long prison term in India for his involvement in the hijacking of an Indian aircraft.

The arrests confirm a very unpleasant fact that Bangladesh has become an unwitting but easy host to terrorist groups operating in the region. The J-e-M has gained notoriety for attacks on important establishments in India; it works hand-in-glove with the Lashkar-e-Toiba, another very dangerous terrorist outfit.

It also confirms the fact that we have very poor intelligence network or database and that there is little cooperation regionally whatsoever, insofar as combating terrorism is concerned. The fact that one of the arrested, who had served term in prison in India, fled back to Bangladesh after being released recently from prison is testimony to that. Had that not been so, such a person should have been handed over to Bangladesh after release and tagged by the security agencies here and kept under strict watch. In this case, apparently, he was free to rejoin a proscribed terrorist group.

Although the law enforcing agencies must be complimented for a good job done, we call for stricter vigilance because, more likely than not, there are other members who are either acting as sleeper cells or actively engaged in planning terrorist acts, inside or outside the country.

The issue once again reinforces the call for a regional approach to combat the extremists. There is compelling rationale, from what has happened in the recent case, for close interaction amongst the relevant intelligence agencies in the region. Terrorism, whatever maybe their motivations, are common threat to regional peace and stability; and all the countries of the region have suffered the cruelty perpetrated by the terrorists, some more than others. There cannot be a greater compulsion than this for South Asian countries to put their minds and resources together to eliminate the scourge.

Tannery relocation

Will it remain an eternally unfinished agenda?

THE High Court has given another six months to the government and tannery owners to relocate the tanneries from the city's Hazaribagh area to Savar. The extension of the deadline for shifting the tanneries located at a densely populated area, however, comes in the wake of almost nothing being done by either owners or the government in the last few years to relocate the environmentally dangerous tannery units. The government's plan has been to give the smaller tannery units the facility of using on payment a centrally placed ETP at a special industrial zone at Savar which has not come off the drawing board as yet.

The court ruling issued in June last year asked the government to relocate the tanneries or close them down by February 28 this year. So, the court placed due emphasis on the issue as tanneries in their existing location has had highly negative impact on the city's environment. But the owners could do nothing that fell in their part to do, in the last eight months except applying for yet another time extension.

So the ground situation has remained unchanged despite repeated reminders by environmental activists and the media which were bolstered by the court order.

In the meantime, industrial effluents are being dumped into the mortally sick Buriganga -- much the same way as the owners did in the past. The people living around the tanneries remain exposed to the pollution which causes various ailments including respiratory and skin problems. It is a matter of great concern that a huge number of people were born and are growing up in the vicinity of tanneries.

Now the question is, what is going on? There is a clear order from the highest court on relocation of the tanneries. The owners appear to be happy with their tactic of applying for time again and again. But the matter must come to an end. The concern expressed by many over the presence of tanneries in the city has to be translated into corrective action.

Now, the government has to take a tough stand on the issue. Environmental hazards associated with tanneries are far too great to be ignored or handled without a sense of urgency. We expect that relocation of tanneries will take place before the expiry of the latest time limit, at least a tangible headway should be made suggesting that relocation is firmly on course.

Can't we resettle some in plain lands?

It is the cardinal duty of the government and the people of the country to preserve the sanctity of the ethnic people, and one way of doing it is not to ever encroach upon their lands, homesteads, cattle-heads and culture. Therefore, by sending some riff-raff to the hills we have not been able to achieve anything but create enemies of the once peace-loving people of the hills. The sooner we leave them alone the better.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE people of the hills and the people of the plain lands are two diametrically opposite entities. They do not belong to each other's worlds. Their religion, traditions, customs, values, food, language and lifestyles are worlds apart. "Never the twain shall meet." So, let's face it, with due honesty, they can never live side by side in peace and harmony. Therefore, it is sheer foolishness to politically sweet-talk them or militarily force them to live as neighbours. Everyone is paying a high price for this. Today, in their own land, hill people are searching for cover to save themselves from the cutters of the settlers. So, our progeny, for centuries to come, will often wake up hearing the cries of death and destruction in the hills, unless the process is reversed.

The settlers from the plain lands, like some invading marauders (see Avatar), were forced upon the simple people of the hills, and it resulted in a man-made catastrophe that better be rolled back. It is a slow and deliberate process of marginalisation of the ethnic people, who are part and parcel of this country, but with unique characteristics of their own. No one has the right to destroy those unique characteristics in the name of integration.

The hill people have been living there for over one thousand years and they never came down to the plain lands to grab the land and property of the people there. But on our part we pushed them farther into the hills as we kept on grabbing their land with impunity, starting from Cox's Bazar. In the sixties, Cox's Bazar was a predominantly Chakma

village, clean and beautiful with Chakma boys and girls selling trinkets to the handful of tourists. Today, Cox's Bazar looks like Sadarghat. Rangamati looks like Sadarghat in the making.

Let's not try to hide the fact that the hills have lost their beauty with settlers swarming like rats everywhere. They are noisy, raucous, unclean and undisciplined, to say the least. Most of them loaf around, as works are limited. If you look closely you will find that an overwhelming number of the settlers are good-for-nothing people who have been sent there by corrupt politicians. They grab anything in the hills that comes their way to earn a living. Many others have taken various types of crimes to the hills that never existed there before. These criminals continue to thrive with the blessings of some corrupt policemen and politicians.

What is the solution? Where is the answer? How can the situation be reversed? Is there any way the hills and the hill people can be saved from the clutches of the plain land settlers, before all the hills are razed to the ground by the earth contractors with the backing of the corrupt politicians and law enforcers? We look so helplessly around for answers but it seems the *rakkhaks* have turned *bhakkhaks* (protectors turned molesters).

Yet, in our frantic bid to be of any help, we try to come up with some idea and hope that someone in the administration would be bold enough to place it before the higher authorities. The idea is, why can't we resettle a large number of the present settlers in CHT in the uninhabited, un-occupied char lands (shoals) like Urir Char and Nijhum Deep,

and also in new lands that are coming up in the Meghna basin area? Plain land people are basically adept in fishing and farming, so they would easily find ways and means of earning a living there.

According to scientists, Bangladesh could acquire new landmass measuring 10 to 15 thousand square kilometres, simply by placing cross dams in the southern part to trap sedimentation coming down from the Himalayas. In this regard, proposals have been submitted to the governments of the past with assurance of funds and technical assistance from the Dutch government, but for some mysterious reasons no one showed any interest. It's amazing that in a land-hungry country no government gave the prospect of acquiring new land in the south any priority!

If the present government is serious about peaceful settlement of the volatile CHT issue, it will have to take other options into consideration. Whatever has

been done in the past was not hundred percent foolproof and not enough. The recent flaring up of violence is a burning example of that. Therefore, find alternate places to settle the plain land people (as suggested above) and do not allow growth of the population of the settlers in the hills any further. Except for some, Bangalis should not be allowed to settle in the hills in the hinterlands.

It is the cardinal duty of the government and the people of the country to preserve the sanctity of the ethnic people, and one way of doing it is not to ever encroach upon their lands, homesteads, cattle-heads and culture. Therefore, by sending some riff-raff to the hills we have not been able to achieve anything but create enemies of the once peace-loving people of the hills. The sooner we leave them alone the better.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star. E-mail: shahnoorwahid@yahoo.co.uk



Diabolic Dhaka

The ever-worsening traffic tangle, air pollution and severe scarcity of electricity, gas and drinking water have turned the capital into a diabolic city. The young generation, which is growing up in a claustrophobic environment, is becoming vulnerable to so many social ailments.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT is not at all surprising that Dhaka has been ranked as the 2nd worst city in the world in a recent global survey of livability, as living conditions are deteriorating fast.

The survey conducted by the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit, based on 30 factors, including political and economic stability, healthcare, education, environment and infrastructural facilities, puts Dhaka just ahead of Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.

Another global survey revealed that Singapore edged out Tokyo and Hong Kong as the best city in Asia for expatriates to live in, while Dhaka is the worst, just ahead of Karachi.

Dhaka was also bracketed with the 10 most polluted cities in 2007 and 2008,

with automobiles emitting 50,700 tons of carbon dioxide and 8,550 tons of nitrogen oxide annually, posing serious health threats. The study also found some 6.10 lakh children showing symptoms of asthma in Dhaka.

The measures taken so far to resolve the traffic tangle, which include introducing automatic traffic signalling and three-lane system, re-fixing office and school timings and dividing the city into seven zones, have seen no success. This clearly suggests that the problem is deep-rooted and comprehensive measures are needed to solve it.

At least 5.25 lakh motorised vehicles now ply the Dhaka streets everyday against 3.03 lakh in 2003. According to BRTA, more than 3,750 motorised vehicles hit the streets of Dhaka every month, with 180 new vehicles being registered on

average everyday. The number of non-motorised vehicles in the capital is over five lakh.

Dhaka now has to accommodate over 10 lakh vehicles while it has the capacity for around 1.5 lakh vehicles with 250-300 kilometre roads. A city needs roads on 25% of its total area but Dhaka has roads on only 8% of its landmass. The number of vehicles in the city is nearly seven times the capacity of the roads, which is a major cause of terrible traffic tangle.

The capital city has already turned too ugly to behold. The ever-worsening traffic tangle, air pollution and severe scarcity of electricity, gas and drinking water have turned the capital into a diabolic city. The young generation, who are growing up in a claustrophobic environment, is becoming vulnerable to so many social ailments.

The underground water level in the capital has reached such an alarming proportion that the prime minister warned the nation about Dhaka facing an earthquake threat as its fallout. Experts have also been issuing similar warnings since long as the city is losing its hydrological balance because of indiscriminate withdrawal of underground water.

The local government (LGRD) minister also expressed his grave concern about the city, apprehending that an unimaginable environmental disaster was awaiting the city dwellers.

In fact, these are old stories told afresh only to highlight the gravity of the situation.

The total population of Dhaka city grew from 0.1 million in 1906 to 12 million in 2008. Though nobody knows for sure, the guesstimate is that the present population of Dhaka is over 15 million, and more than two thousand people are being added to this number every day.

According to Social Science Research Council of the Planning Ministry, more than 71% of the city's nearly one million rickshaw-pullers were farmers prior to their migration to the capital. Lack of earning opportunities in the rural areas forced them to migrate to the capital though they used to enjoy a better livelihood in their villages. Stopping of such city bound exodus has become an imperative to protect Dhaka from becoming a vast city of slums.

Although two master plans for the city were formulated back in 1959 and 1997, they were never implemented. The Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan was prepared in the third stage. What is

now imperative to make the capital livable is to curb further unplanned sprawl of the city and to expand the road network in accordance with the master plan.

Land grabbing and river pollution are, no doubt, other major causes of environmental degradation in the city. The land grabbers have now extended their greedy hands to grab the canals and rivers around the capital city. The government now has the list of land grabbers. Public expectation is that the government will deliver on the pledge to make Dhaka's rivers and canals free.

With the humiliating distinction of being the second worst city in the world, Dhaka is really a diabolic city plunged in manifold problems.

The government has finalised a Dhaka Mass Transit Authority Act to form an authority to operate metro-rail (mass rapid transit), dedicated bus service (bus rapid transit), subways and waterways in and around the city, aiming at facilitating speedy commuter movement.

Tk.107 crore has gone down the drain, as the mega project of circular waterways around the Dhaka city was shelved. The project was taken up in 2004, ostensibly to reduce traffic holdups in the capital.

Starting the construction in 1999, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation has so far built three lines, 60 kilometres in length, in six years. About five years have already passed since the 20-year Strategic Transport Plan was prepared, and it may take decades to implement the metro-rail mega project.

The dwellers of Dhaka city have become quite accustomed to hearing about such mega projects turning Dhaka into a city fit for the 21st century, but have hardly seen any initiative that would suggest that there is hope for the future.

Dhaka remains as a problem-ridden city with terrible traffic congestion, scarcity of electricity, gas and drinking water, and lack of security, despite the promises by all the successive governments.

Therefore, the government needs to take some serious steps urgently to protect the city from imminent disaster. First of all, Dhaka bound exodus must be stopped and the huge number of unfit vehicles must be withdrawn from the streets. Dhaka is extremely overburdened with more than 15 million people scrambling for its limited facilities and one million vehicles crawling on the streets.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: annhaque@hotmail.com



Suffocating in its own pollution.