

## Cracking down on cell phone crimes

*But let it not affect expansion of mobile networks*

It is certainly makes sense for the government to crack down on cell phone crimes through tightening the rules about the use of mobile phones in the country. Why such a step has been so long in coming is rather surprising, given that efforts have been underway since 2006 to check the misuse of cell phones, especially in the matter of utilizing them for criminal activity. More worryingly, we fail to understand why the authorities have till now been unable to ensure a foolproof registration of mobile phone users despite the fact that it is not really hard to do the job. In the recent past, much concern has been expressed about the threats that individuals and organizations have been receiving from unscrupulous and nefarious elements. Needless to say, these threats have generally centred around demands for money. These criminal elements have been rather active in trying to extort money through their faceless threats to people and organizations that are generally known to be well off economically.

It is in such a context that these cell phone threats need to be curbed through addressing the security issue that people have faced of late. A particular point we would like to raise here is that in these times there are standard tracking devices that have proved highly effective in hunting down those prone to abusing cell phones. We believe these tracking devices can easily be employed in nabbing the elements who have been hurling threats of various sorts to people.

All said and done, there must be a caveat where the planned steps in the cell phone scene are concerned. For, indeed if there are some areas where we can justifiably compare ourselves with the rest of the world, one of the first points that come to mind is the mobile phone. It has to do with the fact that the mobile phone has been an extremely significant element in promoting and developing people-to-people connectivity across the globe as well as within the country. For Bangladesh, the mobile revolution (if one may call it that) has been highly beneficial in that it has helped us to keep in touch with such global business centres as the Americas and Europe. Internally, marketing forces of demand and supply have been greatly bolstered through mobile networking.

We can safely suggest, given the varied productive uses these phones have been put to, that the growth of the cell phone network can claim a place at the top of our list of achievements. It has many other possibilities that are waiting to be utilised. In a word, let security concerns be not allowed to overtake the agenda for expansion of mobile networks. The need to apprehend cell phone criminals, who are clearly a minority of mobile phone users, must not clash with the bigger job of ensuring a continuity and relentless expansion of the mobile phone network in our dealings with one another and with the rest of the world.

## Where plenty is a curse!

*Farmers deliver but only to go waste*

WHEREAS bumper cash crops should put a smile on the face of producers and give a wafting sense of comfort to consumers, they are actually leaving the former accursed and the latter bemoaning predictable loss of relief in prices. The case in point is the abundant availability of potatoes and tomatoes vis-à-vis our stark incapacity to store or conserve them. In no time, on being hauled from the field, can their freshness evaporate, they wilt and rot before the very eyes of the producers, unless of course these have been promptly stacked and tucked away into the safe temperature of cold stores.

These are highly perishable commodities with predictable instant market demand while the bulk of them require to be conserved through cold storage and processing facilities for off-season off-takes, marketing and diversified use. Thus, not only is the waste staved off but the farmers' chances of getting remunerative prices are also brightened. As for potatoes, it is an unqualified disaster for the producers because of the fact that as against bumper of 100 lakh metric tonnes, the capacity of all cold stores put together is 24 lakh tonnes. Even allowing for retention of a quantity as seeds and application of traditional preservation techniques, the surplus is bound to present a stupendous challenge. We give export incentives for RMG and other sectors. Why don't we spare a thought for incentivising potato export. Simultaneously it is time for industrial use of potato by setting up potato flakes plants.

Think too of the sight of tomatoes plentifully harvested in Sylhet and spilling over to the streets strewn all over in front of DC's office by demonstrating farmers irked by their tomato produce selling at Taka one per kg.

On the one hand, we are egging the farmers on to produce more, giving them all kinds of input support, and they are also devoting increased acreage to food and cash crops. Yet, on the other, we don't have silos enough to keep the produce or the processing units to preserve them in other forms, or indeed targeted markets for export of surpluses.

In the process, the farmers are not even getting the cost price with the result that they are likely to feel discouraged from producing more. This calls for immediate policy and operational linkages between agricultural extension activities on the one side and preservation and marketing facilities on the other.

## A quiet violence

But the truth is that in the culture of today, casual misogyny is everywhere. Our society's attitude towards women and assumptions about their role and rights are fundamentally unfair and obnoxious.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

FOR my column title today, I am stealing the title of the classic account by Betsy Hartmann and James Boyce of the year they spent in a small Bangladeshi village in the early 1970s.

The violence in their title refers to the violence done to the soul by the grinding poverty and hopelessness they found in the Bangladeshi countryside. But I have always thought the term a very fitting one to describe the violence done to the souls of women in our society, and it is in this sense that I use it today.

What has precipitated this meditation on how women remain second-class citizens in our society was attending Dhaka's first ever showing of "The Vagina Monologues" last week in an event billed as V-Day in Dhaka.

V-Day is a global movement to end violence against women and girls that raises funds and awareness through benefit productions of playwright Eve Ensler's award winning play.

Seeing the poignant and groundbreaking performance brought home to me that as much as the overt violence against women and girls in our society, such as acid-throwing, rape, and domestic abuse, need to be confronted, equally corrosive is the quiet violence that women suffer every day in Bangladesh.

This is the violence of often not being able to walk down the street without abuse or harassment, of single women not being able to rent a place of their own, of all the countless petty ways in which women's freedom is constrained or society conspires to chasten and humiliate them if they try to break free of its shackles.

This is why the performance was so important in its own right. In addition to confronting issues of violence against women, the play also broached a lot of taboo subjects, such as women's sexuality and right to be able to control their own bodies, that we never see discussed in polite society in Bangladesh.

part of our cultural heritage. It was not long ago that the sight of a girl abused or harassed on the street or in a bus would outrage on-lookers, and women could travel freely throughout the country without fear for their safety.

But the truth is that in the culture of today, casual misogyny is everywhere. Our society's attitude towards women and assumptions about their role and rights are fundamentally unfair and obnoxious.

If we want to fix what's wrong with our society, our attitudes towards women and the freedoms that we permit them (or do not permit them) is as good a place to start as any. Even other crucial problems such as poverty and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities have a gender dimension. It is always women who get it the worst.

Now, of course, a lot has improved over the years. There are far more educational and employment opportunities open to women today, and the status of women within the family and society as a whole has improved immeasurably.

But many simple freedoms continue to elude women and they continue to be subjected to appalling double-standards and hypocrisy in our male-dominated society. Heaven help a woman caught in a sexual indiscretion, for instance. She would be torn to pieces by society in a way a man would not.

More than anything else, the path to women's equality and respect for women's rights and freedoms will need to originate in a healthy attitude towards women, and this includes a healthy attitude (in place of the current culture of shame and prurience) towards women's sexuality. Trying to control women's sexuality is nothing more than another way for men to try to control women.

This is why V-Day was so important. It shone a light on violence against women, but it also shone a light on the quiet violence that they must contend with every day, and attempted to start a discourse on breaking through the taboos and attitudes and assumptions that continue to curtail women's freedoms.

As long as we continue to cling to our taboos and attitudes and assumptions about sex and sexuality, the status of women will never equal that of men. As long as we continue to propagate a culture of shame and double-standards, we will continue to create a society of inequality and immiseration.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

## Mr. Speaker speaks, does anybody listen?

Can the speaker break that cycle? He has spoken alright. Even better, he has threatened the lawmakers. But are they going to listen to him? More than ever before, he is going to learn that it's not enough to speak if one wishes to be heard. One has to act.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

AN outraged Speaker of the Parliament spoke up last week, when he gave the country's lawmakers a piece of his mind. He used tough words to reprimand them. Then he warned that in future unbecoming conduct in the House wasn't going to be tolerated. The speaker has been right in his outburst and he has spoken the words on our lips. But can he do what he said? Can he go it alone?

I for one have my doubts. The speaker is responsible for keeping order in the House. Can he single-handedly fix what is inherently flawed? In the end, he is the master of ceremonies, by no means the producer of the show.

Nevertheless, it was good to hear that he spoke. He had every reason to be disgusted and angry. He vented his frustration because it hurt him. And hurt him it should, when politicians defiled the sanctity of the very temple of which he is the high priest. But the mad Wednesday was something more. It was an alarming proof that those whom we send to the Parliament have streaks of irrationality about them.

Those of us who saw and heard that madness on television were jolted into similar revulsion. Some of our lawmakers behaved like outlaws. They jumped out of their seats and rushed towards their opponents like Visigoths destroying a civilisation. Hands over ears, we heard them spitting obscenities faster than assault weapons firing bullets.

No denying that the speaker's reaction was necessary. But is it going to be sufficient? It may secure a temporary ceasefire, but it won't disarm the combatants. In a highly charged partisan climate, abuse and irritation of opponents have become the defining skills for political success.

That skill was why the whole thing started. The fateful Wednesday stemmed from a bizarre notion that slandering a dead politician could be politically relevant. Lest we forgot, it was the logical conclusion of an earlier Wednesday. On January 20, the prime minister responded to a question from Waresat Hossain, an

Awami League member. What she said was slanted against a late president, an iconic figure for the opposition party. She doubted if Zia's body was buried in his grave.

Even worse, that sarcasm was sadly repeated, as if repeating a bad joke was going to make it less offending. I wish the speaker had intervened then as strongly as he did last week. A stitch in time could save nine. The second Wednesday might not have happened at all.

This is where my heart sinks. The speaker has ignored the ventriloquist and scoffed at the puppet. Even though his reaction has been widely covered by the

media, and his comments have thoroughly thrilled this country, he has failed to convince us whether he spoke for the Parliament or he spoke for the party.

The speaker said nothing when a dead man was being ridiculed in the House. He said nothing until things came to a head, until that ridicule was returned with ridicule from other side of the floor. True, the other side also doesn't have a good track record. Their leader has to celebrate her birthday on the same day Mujib was killed.

Tit for tat, our politics, like a black cat in a dark room, is going in circles. From dead issues it has moved to dead people, a lamentable transformation that gives away the gravitas of politics to the gloom of the grave. Like a downward spiral feeding on itself, hatred is going in circles. It's a vicious cycle turning on itself.

Can the speaker break that cycle? He has spoken alright. Even better, he has threatened the lawmakers. But are they going to listen to him? More than ever before, he is going to learn that it's not enough to speak

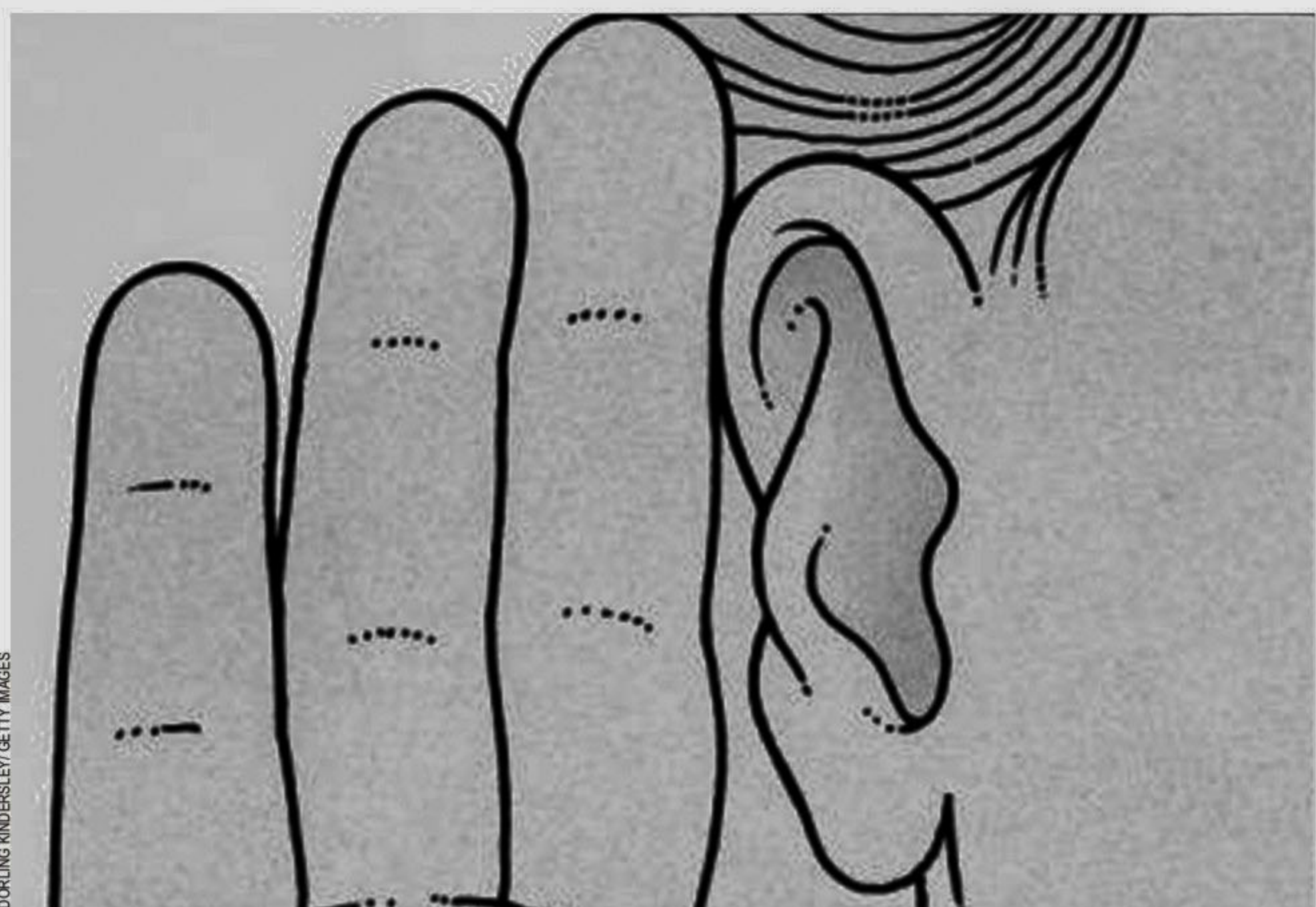
if one wishes to be heard. One has to act.

This is how the speaker can act to try his luck. He doesn't have to target all 330 members of the Parliament. He doesn't have to bother himself with the continued vigilance of who does it again. He can narrow down his target to two members only.

Between the leader of the treasury and the leader of the opposition, the speaker can keep the Parliament on a tight leash. He can sit with them and get their word that members on both sides are going to behave. It's an advantage, which is also a disadvantage, that power in a party is concentrated in a single hand. The leader's wish is the party's command. Anything is possible if the leader is convinced.

If the speaker is serious, he can do it. He can tell both leaders that a madhouse Parliament is to neither's benefit. It's an effective opportunity to use his bargaining chip. If they don't listen, he can quit.

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I can't hear you!