

Crossfire deaths

Anything but legally tenable

THE Director General of Rab has claimed that the 622 killings in crossfire in the last six years, that the special law enforcement agency is responsible for, were well within the framework of law. The claim is as assailable as it is clearly untenable.

Ever since the formation of the special force, raised to combat the slide in law and order, we have appreciated its successes like arresting the extremists and arms recovery on a huge scale in different places. But we are certainly horrified by the crossfire deaths. Such extra judicial killings cannot be condoned under any circumstances in a civilized setting. The law enforcers' foremost duty is to uphold rule of law and protect lives of citizens, and not to snuff them out even in situations where they are suspected to be on the wrong side of law and more so when they were in custody.

It has also been claimed that all the crossfire killings were duly investigated. Here we have some legitimate questions to ask. The first question is who was the investigator? Were the investigation reports made public? Are they not being prosecutor, jury, executioner and judge at the same time. That amounts to gross undermining of the justice system. Secondly, it is not at all clear that only the hardened criminals were killed. The entire crossfire scheme becomes legally and morally untenable if it has claimed even one innocent victim. Obviously, even the most notorious criminals have the right to seek legal aid and is entitled to due process of law. That is where the real test of rule of law lies.

The modus operandi of Rab, particularly when it comes to crossfire, can not be above question simply because it claims immunity before law. The same story of a criminal being taken to a place to identify and arrest some other criminals and the hapless fellow getting killed in crossfire is being told again and again. It is not known why the crossfire victim is never given any protective gear on such hazardous missions.

That Rab struck fear in the minds of hardened criminals is true and people did heave a sigh of relief when extremists and known outlaws were arrested. But that does not give them the licence to kill those in custody. Rab authorities have to make all investigation reports on crossfire killings public or risk losing the sympathy of the people. People do want the dangerous criminals to be brought to justice but not in a way that is grossly inadmissible in law. For, respect for rule of law is the stuff of which a civilised society is made.

Wild cat strike by transport workers

Stop taking public hostage

WHAT the transport owners under the banner of a local transport owner and worker association did by way of halting operations between the port city and some southern districts including Cox's Bazaar is not unique. All too often the public have been held hostage to service providers, including those running private transport business, as a result of wild cat strikes. The recent one was done as a protest against what the association termed as extortion by an office bearer of Cox's Bazaar unit of the ruling party.

The reason for the strike is very amazing. Reportedly, the owner of a transport company was asked by the local AL leader, who also happens to be the chairman of the union where the accident occurred, to pay up a certain amount to settle a hit and run case out of court, which occurred on Cox's Bazaar Ramu road, and allegedly threatened the owners with dire consequences if they failed to pay up.

While we make no value judgment on the matter of the alleged extortion, which we hope the ruling party as well as the law enforcing agencies will take cognizance of, we find the action of the bus owners and workers quite preposterous. Their action put thousands of travellers in the greater district of Chittagong, including several thousand tourists who were left high and dry in Cox's Bazaar, in great distress.

This is but another example of utter disregard for public comfort and safety, which the government must address seriously. Almost everyday we hear of instances of road blocks being put up as mark of protest by factory workers for the death of a colleague in a road accident, or non-payment of dues by the factory owner, or of long tailbacks running into miles as a result of barricades put up by students of a college or university to ventilate their anger. While one has the right to feel aggrieved at the death of a colleague or for going without pay for months, why should those that have nothing to do with their condition be made to undergo the hardship which their ill thought of action causes? And very often the situation is further aggravated due to unnecessary interference by party men seeking to make some hay out of the situation.

We would like to underscore to all concerned, including service providers, the need to keep public interest above all else and ask the public office holders to refrain from actions that complicate issues rather than solve them.

Mega projects, mega failures?

They say that when you cannot do simple things like putting guards at open railway crossings or bringing order to a very chaotic Mohakhali junction, how can you make us believe that you can manage mega projects like the Padma Bridge, highway to China, international airport, expressway across the city, underground railway and so on?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

PROFESSIONAL cynics out there say that taking care of only four things would ensure the present *khomotabans* another round of *khomota* no matter how the disoriented *khomotaheens* try to unsettle them (Doesn't the Bengali word *khomota*, meaning power, remind you of Czar Nicholas II and his fate?). Anyway, to go back to taking care of four things -- these are: (i) Improve electricity situation. (ii) Send Chhatra League to St. Helena. (iii) Improve city and highway traffic system, and (iv) Contain the spiralling of prices of essential food items.

That's it. Simple. But, can you do it? Well, you cannot afford to say no. You cannot dawdle, either. Not in the slightest can you scratch your head and look to your deputies. The onus is on you so it is you who shall have to do it. You shall have to deliver because that's why you ladies and gentlemen are here.

Cynics are out there whispering that if you cannot do it then why did the state spend millions to have you people elected and seated inside the parliament? Don't tell us those are our jobs to do? Honestly speaking, if we could solve those problems then we wouldn't need you ladies and gentlemen to create traffic congestions on the roads, would we! You are supposed to go to parliament to solve those problems and not to talk %&*#)._%*&*%. Hope you can decipher the meaning.

Cynics are also going around saying that you ladies and gentlemen find solving the above-mentioned four problems difficult, and that's why you are trying to divert our attention by talking about

fantastic, gargantuan projects that have nothing to do with our everyday hunger and other needs.

They say that when you cannot do simple things like putting guards at open railway crossings or bringing order to a very chaotic Mohakhali junction, how can you make us believe that you can manage mega projects like the Padma Bridge, highway to China, international airport, expressway across the city, underground railway and so on? The credibility is not there, you see.

Cynics question whether the highway to China would ensure three square meals for a family of farmers or a day labourer. As far as Padma Bridge is concerned, they say that Bengalis have been going across the Padma River in boats and canoes for two thousand years. They can do so for another one hundred years, if you only commission 20 good quality ferryboats. Therefore, instead of trying out simple solutions of simple problems, you ladies and gentlemen are busy beating around the bush in an attempt to befool the people.

What happens when you take on some mega projects? Yes, they ensure fat amounts for party funds and definitely that is how political parties collect funds. No problem with that. But how do you manage those mega projects once those have been installed? Where is the local maintenance expertise? Do we have sufficiently trained manpower at every level to ensure smooth operation? And then, shall we have the freedom to hire genuine people with good track records or shall we be pressurised to take in political riffraff?

The history of the public service sector in this country is bad ... very bad indeed. None of the public sectors like Bangladesh



Start small before you think big.

Railway, BIWTA, BIWTC, BJMC, BTMC, Titas Gas, TCB, WASA, PDB, DESA, BRTC and Biman could ever earn the respect of the people. None of these sectors could ever earn a single taka profit in 38 years. There is more. Look at the city road conditions! Look at the garbage collection and mosquito situation! Look at the water, sanitation and sewer service! Have these improved any bit in the last decade? No.

But, why? Well, the answer lies deep within those public sectors. Don't forget that we are dependent on some ill-trained and highly corrupt people to run any service. On top of that, we have some ever-hungry union leaders and political party cadres to eat everything from within like termites. Therefore, any mega project is destined to become dysfunctional in two years at the most.

On the contrary, the history of similar public sectors in the neighbouring countries says different things. The Patal Rail

(underground rail) in Kolkata could see profit within five years. The railway in India in general made huge profit when Lalu Prasad was railway minister (It had earned \$5 billion - Rs.20,000 crore as cash profit). The airlines in some of those countries are making profit and adding new aircraft to the fleet.

Therefore, to earn the confidence of the people back, forget about all those mega projects for the time being. Install more electricity generation plants. Solve the traffic problem. Introduce alternate marketing and price control strategy. And last but not least, send the armed goons of Chhatra League to prison and you will come back to power again. You don't need any crystal ball gazing. You don't need any astrologer to say this. It's guaranteed.

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The sweat and the sweets

A general presumption is that earnings from the sweat of our workers of home and abroad help us reap the sweets -- raising foreign exchange reserves and enabling us to import more, increasing domestic employment, especially for women, and producing domestic linkage effects.

ABDUL BAYES

IT is now widely acclaimed that remittances and earnings from RMGs are emerging as the key drivers of our economy. Even during the recent recessionary period that rocked the world, both provided us with a sigh of relief as far as recessionary catastrophe is concerned. Mahabub Hossain and I have observed that remittances (both domestic and foreign) now constitute 26-30 percent of the income of rural households compared to about 9 percent two decades back. More importantly, even for functionally landless households, remittance now accounts for about 13 percent of household income.

It is reported that remittances from our workers abroad now account for about 8 percent of our GDP. In fact, remittance inflow more than offsets the savings-investment gap; it exceeds various types of inflows, especially Official Development Assistance (ODA) and net earning from exports. A recent World Bank report shows that the growth of global remittances has been robust in recent years, with 27 percent growth per year during FY 2006-08. This helped maintain current account surplus in respective countries. Again, each additional migrant worker brings in \$816/yr in remittance, and depreciation of exchange rate by one taka increases annual remittance by \$18 million.

On the other hand, earnings from RMG in Bangladesh stand roughly at \$10 billion to share 11 percent of GDP. A general presumption is that earnings from the sweat of our workers at home and abroad help us reap the sweets -- raising foreign exchange reserves and enabling us to import more, increasing domestic employment, especially for women, and producing domestic linkage effects.

M.H. Khondker and Selim Raihan delve deep into the nexus between poverty and the earnings from remittance plus garments. Drawing upon Amber Narayan and others, they observe that head-count poverty in Bangladesh declined from 49 in 2000 to 40 in 2005 -- 9 percentage points, or an annualised growth of 1.8 percent. Quite obviously, and as the authors also argue, a number of factors could have caused this, e.g. provision of micro-credit, inflow of remittances, growth of RMGs,

agricultural growth and growth of non-farm sectors. Using a Computable General Equilibrium Analysis, they worked on the simulation of the remittances and RMG growth effects on the economy of Bangladesh.

Globally, during the last decade, remittances have outpaced private capital flows and ODA. Remittance receipts were about 7 percent of developing countries' imports and about 8 percent of domestic investment. It is further argued that the manifold increase in remittances could have been due to a shift from formal to informal channels. Of course, a large part of that is through informal channels. For example, in Bangladesh the share of informal flow is estimated to be 54 percent; Uganda 80 percent; Dominican Republic 4 percent; El Salvador 15 percent.

The round-about impacts of remittances are worth noting, as revealed by Khandker and Raihan: (a) remittance raises the consumption level of the household groups, especially rural and poor households; (b) the increased consumption of rural households might lead to larger multiplier effects since they are likely to spend more on domestic output which, in turn, would affect employment and income; (c) remittance also stabilises and smoothens household consumption during adverse shocks such as flood, crop failure, energy crises etc.; (d) it supports human capital formation by allowing spending on education and training etc.; (e) lessens the working capital constraints of farms and small-farm operators, etc. However, remittances might lead to wider inequality through disproportionate inflows to better-off households, and they also could have adverse social impacts on spouses and children of remitters.

Khandker and Raihan note that while poverty decreased at 1.8 percent during 2000 and 2005, average GDP growth was 5.5 percent and population growth was 1.2 percent. The period covering years 2000 and 2005 experienced a significant fall in poverty with high growth in remittances and RMG exports. This association tends to suggest that a significant part of poverty decline may be attributed to the growth of remittance of RMG exports.

The poverty impacts of "RMG export demand plus remittance" shock simulation indicates that head count ratio has declined by about 2.5 percentage points in this case compared to the base value. This



We benefit from their hard-earned income.

is a major finding given that almost a quarter of poverty decline between 2000 and 2005 in Bangladesh is attributed to the combine impacts of remittances and RMG export.

Thus, ceteris paribus, if there were not such a growth of remittances and RMG exports during 2000 and 2005, headcount poverty may not have declined by 9 percentage points, but instead by only about 6.5 percentage points. Again had it not been high for remittances alone, poverty would decline by 7.4 percentage points instead of by 9 percentage points. This shows that remittance growth might have played a more important role in reducing poverty than RMG. In general, it is reported that a 10 percent increase in per capita official international remittances leads to a 3.5 percent reduction in poverty.

We can note down a few policy suggestions in this regard:

- To encourage more migration, the NGOs should take up micro-credit programs for households with migratory motives of members. We want to emphasise this point as, in early periods, only rich people could migrate because of availability of financial capital. Since the poor had little on that count, income disparity widened in rural areas. Over the years, the inequality was reduced to an extent (gini coefficient is still 0.71 from 0.82 in the 1980s) as small and poor households somehow managed

to send their members. But if NGOs could be involved, that would ensure transparency, accountability and some pre-migratory education;

- The government should search for markets through "economic diplomacy" and facilitate skill development of workers at home;
- The government should see that migrants are not cheated by the recruiting agencies;
- Formalisation of inflows through exchange facilities should be enhanced. On the export front, serious attempts should be made at providing access to electricity/gas, diversifying exports both commodity and region-wise; export incentives through trade facilitation should be increased and we should see that the exchange rate does not have anti-export bias.

Last but not the least, it should be remembered that an employer in the long run benefits more by paying remunerative wages to the workers as higher wage would translate into higher productivity and higher earnings for the employers. The employer should also ensure that the place of production is safe, sound, and secured, otherwise it might deplete the capital stock of the owner. After all, a stitch in time saves nine!

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