

Crossfire killings

Denial doesn't alter reality

IT is difficult to accept the comment of the law minister that there are no crossfire deaths in the country any more. His statement was in response to the Amnesty International report on the matter, and one that we have been seized with since the extralegal practice has come to be employed with alarming and increasing regularity.

The AI report comes as an indictment of the government's abject disregard for the rule of law, not to speak of the AL's reneging on its electoral commitment to see an end to this abhorrent practice. 'Crossfire' or 'encounter killings' or call it what you will, is a disgrace for anyone that claims to adhere to justice and rule of law.

The statement of the law minister bears no resemblance at all to the reality on ground. Going by the figures mentioned in the report at least 70 people were victims of 'crossfire' in the first nine months of 2009. The figure has increased since then, regrettably, and a few such killings reportedly have taken place since the minister made the statement. We have noticed all governments, past and present, unabashedly refusing to acknowledge the reality, and yet we continue to read of such deaths almost everyday. Added to the encounter killings is the new phenomenon of dead bodies turning up in odd places. It is even more worrisome when the High Court directive to the authorities not to resort to 'crossfire' is disregarded.

We say again what we have said in the past no civilised nation, and no government that claims to value democratic rights and the rule of law, can turn a blind eye to the security forces acting as the judge, jury and executioner. There are only two assumptions that one can draw from these incidents. It is either that the security agencies are deliberately flouting instructions or that these are taking place with the government's knowledge, which makes the government a party to the crime. Perhaps it is the latter, and the government seems to have been persuaded that although the method is highly questionable it may be effective. But it is our view that ultimately upholding the rule of law is not only more sustainable but also has a salutary effect of immense value. Experiences in many countries have shown that short-cut to justice breeds greater violence and corrodes the faith in law.

Refutation, such as the one we heard from the law minister, is not the first of its kind. Other senior ministers of the AL-led alliance government had come out with similar denials as had BNP ministers during their tenure. One would hope that they realise that such disclaimers do not do credit to the sense of acuity of the public nor does it do anything to change their perception of the matter. And for a party that claims to value democratic norms the AL must put a stop to extra-judicial killings before anymore damage is done to the country's image and to the ruling party's credibility.

Nab Facebook abusers, but don't shut it down

It throttles freedom of expression, and gives a wrong signal about the country

CRIMINALITY and immorality must be curbed swiftly and ruthlessly whenever and whenever they occur. In these days of advanced technology, there are certainly the many ways in which people can take advantage of such means as Facebook, mobile cameras and the like to indulge in activities which militate against social norms. That being the truth, there is equally another truth, which is that there are ways in which such individuals can be tracked down and punished. It is against such a reality that we believe those who have been misusing Facebook in Bangladesh should be taken to task.

In this connection, we condemn the uploading of indecent material about some leading personalities of the country on Facebook. While we certainly believe in the principle of freedom of expression, we also hold the considered view that such freedom must not give way to licentiousness, to a point where values will come under threat. The use of insulting or demeaning images against any individual on Facebook calls for stern action. However, taking action must not mean clamping a ban on the whole system. In the present instance, blocking Facebook, even temporarily, sends out the wrong message that the authorities are not only unwilling to tolerate dissent but are also uncomfortable with the rapid advances being made in technology. Today's world is an open world and Facebook is a part of it. Trying to ward off such a reality can only be seen as adopting a myopic outlook on matters around us. The ban on Facebook, from such a point of view, can only be considered as an attempt to stifle individual freedom.

We will surely appreciate strong action against those who misuse technology. In recent times, allegations of Facebook and mobile phones being utilized to undermine reputations, particularly of young women, have come up. Let the authorities go after the people behind such misdeeds by using, again, technology to nab them. But let not the bad deeds of a few make a casualty of technology itself. The choice is between insularity and openness. We opt for the latter. We, therefore, urge the government to withdraw the ban it has imposed on Facebook without delay.



Who makes the rules?

Traffic rules left to the mercy of drivers!

The big question that arises here is, will the killing on the roads stop with the arrest of and punishment to the driver responsible for the accident, as demanded by the Buet students?

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

IT was not long ago that another post appeared about "killer buses" in this column. In fact, such write-ups in newspaper columns appear after a road mishap occurs that are able to spark widespread opprobrium and protest as well as a flood of compassion for the victim. Otherwise, reports on the death from reckless driving usually go without much furore over them.

The road accident of May 27, in which a Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) fresher was crushed to death by a bus while it was backing at Azimpur crossing, for example, was one such mishap of consequence.

The Buet students took out angry protest demonstrations, blocked traffic movement on roads through Buet campus, Plassey and Nilkhet areas for long hours, damaged vehicles plying through those roads and made demands like building of an entrance gate to the area named after the mishap victim, arrest of the driver and helper of the killer bus, compensation for the victim from bus owner, and so on and so forth.

With this fateful road crash, followed by another on the Dhaka-Narayanganj link road on May 29 that killed a garment worker, we have again been tumbled to the issue of death on the roads. But this new awareness about such a very grave threat to our lives on the roads may again be consigned to oblivion and negligent bus operators resume their rash driving and continue to send unsuspecting bystanders or pedestrians to their death unless something is done to stop the gratuitous murders on the road.

Before entering into any further discussion on finding a way out of the problem, it would be worthwhile to have a quick look at what is happening on the roads all across the country.

The Bangladesh Road Transport Association's (BRTA) record shows that last year the number of road mishaps in the country was 3,381 and the casualty figure was 2,958. Or, in other words, for every 100 accidents, there were 87.48 deaths, while the proportion of grievous injuries from these road mishaps was 65.74.

In the year before (2008), on the other hand, 3,765 people died from 4,442 road accidents (i.e., 84.75 people died per 100

mishaps), and those receiving serious injuries numbered 2,720, i.e., the percentage of severe injuries from those mishaps was 61.44. The last two years' road mishaps speak volumes for what a veritable death-traps the roads of the country have become.

In the capital city alone, some 45 people die every month due to road accidents. Dhaka Metropolitan police (DMP) Commissioner A.K.M. Shahidul Hoque says that most of the bus drivers of the city have fake driving licences. Obviously, there is hardly any guarantee that those fake licence holders did ever have any training in driving before they took control of the buses.

So, neither the passengers who travel in the city buses nor the pedestrians, or even bystanders, at a bus stop are safe from those bus drivers. And it has exactly been the case with the Buet student, who was just standing at the bus stop quite unaware of the intention of the driver sitting at the steering wheel of the bus nearby.

The big question that arises here is, will the killing on the roads stop with the arrest of and punishment to the driver responsible for the accident, as demanded by the Buet students? The main culprit (the driver) no doubt must get his comeuppance. But then can we be assured that the roads of the city or elsewhere in the country will become safer after that?

Let us have a look at how these bus

drivers respect traffic rules in the city. It will be observed that they are continuously violating the traffic rules by stopping their buses wherever they like, and dropping and picking up passengers as dictated by their sweet will. And in the act, they often defy the traffic police or, in the worst-case scenario, the traffic police looks the other way as the driver breaks the law.

These are not cases of mere coincidence. It is alleged that each of the 150 bus companies operating their city services has to pay Tk.100,000 per month to the traffic police. The total amount thus collected every month would amount to Tk.15 million. And if that is really the case, then why should a driver, whether he is fake or genuine, care at all to honour the traffic rules?

Small wonder that the bus drivers with their fake licences break the traffic laws with gay abandon, and commuters or pedestrians like Shamrat of Buet have to die unnatural deaths about every other day on the roads!

In the circumstances, what is the answer to all these unwarranted deaths on the roads?

There is no alternative to stricter laws to punish the errant drivers. At the same time, the departments that issue driving licences and control the movement of traffic on the roads have also to be rid of corruption in order that the traffic laws could be applied effectively.

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My brother's peacekeeper

But these are variations to the larger theme, of peace. The vital fact is not that the brothers have found peace with the world, or even between themselves, but that they are now at peace with themselves.

M.J. AKBAR

MUKESH and Anil Ambani were born fortunate. We will now find out whether they are also lucky. If they are, they will at long last discover the creative joy of independence.

Fortune is the root and fruit of the fortunate; but their true wealth lies not in money but in the DNA they inherited from Dhirubhai Ambani. Controversy is the sister of success, and Dhirubhai was successful enough to have many such sisters.

But you would have to be an idiot to deny that he was an authentic genius of the 20th century, a visionary who did more than any individual to lift the Indian economy from the shackles of moribund convention and place it on a platform for a 21st century take-off.

Dhirubhai was the first to grasp that Dalal Street, home of the Mumbai stock exchange, consisted of two words. While traditional capitalists concentrated on the first word, he took a revolutionary step towards the second. Others raised capital in the velvet atmosphere of bank

boardrooms, where the murmur of deals was only interrupted by the soft sound of backs being scratched to mutual advantage.

Dhirubhai created capital from the street, and left the street full of capitalists, even as he expanded the horizons of his industrial vision to a width that only the spread of his own arms could encompass.

It was axiomatic that as long as such a charismatic patriarch was alive, his sons would be willingly dependent on his genius. Dhirubhai's death should have been the point of amicable departure, with two brothers finding their separate ways, protecting their personal relations with the glue of a close-knit family. But, like so many elder brothers before (and surely after) him, Mukesh fell victim to a misjudgement. He thought he was the new patriarch, rather than a sibling.

He should have known that Dhirubhai's DNA would have prevented Anil from accepting a glorified, but essentially marginal, place in the family enterprise. Mukesh did not offer his brother a true partnership, just a role

that would be determined by the elder brother.

Anil has perhaps more of his father's spirit than Mukesh, since he was forced to begin with very little. The pace with which he has leapt into the worldwide wealth lists is impressive, but statistics are not the compelling part of this epic.

Dependence is a curious phenomenon, since it creates uneven categories out of affection. The swivel of life can turn a parent into the child, as age shifts the nature of dependence. Every family knows the complex mix of need and resentment that accompanies this flux. The oldest story in the Bible revolves around the dilemmas and decisions of the first family, Adam and Eve; but the second is of Cain and Abel.

When Anil Ambani sought equality or independence, as a right rather than a gift, Mukesh treated it as a personal affront. It was also a challenge to the power he would command as the sole dynast of the Dhirubhai empire. The relationship quickly degenerated into a vindictive struggle more reminiscent of the Byzantine or Mughal eras rather than contemporary battles.

But time has proved that this metaphor is exaggerated, for the old definition of success was one-man-left-standing. As dramatic as the struggle has been, even more remarkable is its resolution. I am not privy to its details, but this much seems certain: the brothers realised that war consumes far more

energy than peace. They must have recognised the sheer waste of their individual abilities on fratricide.

The only people who benefited were lawyers, a comparatively minor expense given the scales on which the brothers operate; and their business competitors, who rushed into space that the brothers left unoccupied because they were preoccupied with each other.

You do not have to be a genius to recognise that a self-inflicted wound can turn gangrenous if it is not healed in time, and effectively, Anil Ambani benefits substantially from the settlement since his companies are in competitive space rather than monopolies, for he has had to nurture them either from birth or early childhood.

The elimination of the non-compete clause from the agreement is by and large meaningless for Anil Ambani, since he already faces heavyweight competition in power, mobile telephony and entertainment, the three pillars of his interests.

But these are variations to the larger theme, of peace. The vital fact is not that the brothers have found peace with the world, or even between themselves, but that they are now at peace with themselves.

If they can sustain the last, count them lucky.

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