

## Rumours leading to unmitigated violence

*This social restiveness must be tackled by all*

**R**ESTIVENESS appears to be fast becoming a social reality in the country nowadays. Almost everywhere and in nearly every situation something of the explosive comes into an expression of emotion. The galling part of the story is that all too often it is plain hearsay or simple rumours which set into motion a train of events that finally ends in disaster or even unmitigated tragedy for all of us. We can cite here the case of what happened in Gazipur on Saturday. Acting on a rumour that Rajuk was acquiring land for the purposes of constructing a satellite town in the region, hundreds of local people went on a rampage. In the process, they ended up vandalizing as many as 200 vehicles, torching a garments factory and laying siege to a public highway for hours together. The difficulties which such mob action can put citizens into can only be imagined.

The social scene at this point, let us make it very clear, is of a highly disturbing note. In almost every situation, there seems to be a violent reflex at work without anyone seeming to care whether such action is at all warranted. Rumours lead to attacks on industrial units. Unsubstantiated reports cause violence on the streets. In offices and industrial establishments, even in educational institutions, values have lately been becoming fugitive. Government officers are locked out of their offices by their subordinates; college principals are locked in by students making unreasonable demands. Even in areas where restraint should be the rule, precipitate action often mars the sense of idealism we would still like to nurture in ourselves. Policemen are always in anger mode, as evidenced by recent reports of their involvement in the killings of citizens. Hundreds have died in so-called crossfires, as RAB and the police would have us know. If that is one side of intolerance, there is the other: on television talk shows, many of those invited generally are not inclined to let their fellow guests speak. Extremism of thought and behaviour seems to govern individual and collective behaviour. Matters of a trifling nature end up in unmitigated violence.

There is today clearly a need for serious reflection on such a decline in social behaviour. We believe the time has come for everyone who matters -- political figures, sociologists, educationists, NGO activists, journalists -- to put their heads together and devise the ways and means by which such regressive behaviour can be rolled back. Where possible, as in educational institutions, offices and industrial units, measures for counseling and guidance can be undertaken.

A moral rejuvenation of society is the fundamental need today. That can happen if we care to look deep into the causes behind all this social unrest.

## Appalling instance of pilferage of collected revenue

*No public service outlet free from corruption -- not even post offices!*

**T**HE news is so stunning that it defies credulity, and it can perhaps happen only in Bangladesh. According to a report appearing in this newspaper, the public exchequer has been losing an amount to the tune of Taka one hundred crore every year from a once dependable public sector institution. And all because, money deposited in many of the post offices in the country, on account of motor vehicle fees and taxes by the public, are not being documented and accounted for as per the rules.

We find it rather incomprehensible that government agencies and service providers continue to defy the rules and procedures of handling public money with such impunity. Where are the annual audit and other oversight mechanisms that we know exist, to keep a tab on departments involved in revenue collection? So much for good governance, oversight and honesty of the public sector!

What makes the matter more indefensible and unpardonable is the fact such reports have been appearing in the media from time to time for many years. And despite that, as well as the fact that it was state revenue that was being misappropriated, no attempt had been made to effectively stop the loss. We have not heard of anyone being brought to book for such large scale corruption. We are shamed by the regime of impunity that has allowed the insidious practice to go on unchecked and unabated in a frequently used public service outlet.

What the matter boils down to is the issue of governance. Regrettably, such practices are increasing both in numbers and spread, in scope and intensity. Whether it is the law enforcing agencies not working within the bounds of law, or the public service providers making service dearer by their unscrupulous demands, the pervasiveness of poor governance is on the increase. And regrettably, either the government is deliberately overlooking the issue or unable to stop the hemorrhage, a dangerous proposition on both counts for any society.

The idea of an alternative mechanism to collect taxes on motor vehicles is being contemplated through online collection. It may be a good idea, but we would like to ask what of the many crores of government revenue that have been lost through misappropriation. What about those that have indulged in the unscrupulous act? While we express our outrage we also demand that exemplary punishment be meted out to persons involved in the embezzlement of public money.



Work started by the previous government?

## Whose mess is it anyway?

**Will the Awami league-led government now in office also show its courage of conviction and stick to the principle of non-interference in the normal functioning of the bureaucracy as a first step to depoliticise it?**

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

*"Every revolution evaporates and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy" -- Franz Kafka*

**T**HE government has a plan to reform the bureaucracy. The main objective of this reform drive, as it has been made known, is ridding bureaucracy of politicisation. That is certainly a good idea, though the agenda is quite novel in that bureaucracy and politics are quite antithetical to each other.

So, there must be a strange twist in the evolution of bureaucracy in Bangladesh so that an unlikely label of political partisanship has been attached to it. But since the existence of the problem in bureaucracy and the need for addressing it has been raised from the highest political quarters in the government, it merits serious consideration from all concerned.

It is worth noting that both the major political parties of the country, Awami

League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), blame each other for politicisation of the civil bureaucracy. This is a new feature of the usual blame game that our political parties are generally used to, though the blame culture is not endemic solely in Bangladesh context.

As a matter of fact, the blame culture is

practiced in almost all democracies under multi-party dispensation. But in point of fact, the new phrase "politicisation of the bureaucracy" was quite unheard of in the political and professional circles before, especially prior to the 1990s since when these two political parties had begun assuming power by turns.

In the post-90s reality, it is not only this new addition to the political polemics that is of significance. The usual rivalry in politics along party lines has also been further intensified by deep hatred and rancorous war of words.

In short, the political pluralism in the form of parliamentary democracy that returned after a long spell of military dictatorship has more or less been stained by confrontational postures, mutual distrust, intolerance and the ugliest kind of smearing and character assassination campaign waged by one political party against another. Add to this the new culture -- "politicisation of bureaucracy."

If the government sincerely wills, it is not really an insurmountable problem to overcome. But along with fighting all other ills, tackling of this new feature of bureaucracy would require genuine effort, not just lip service. And it would require more than just seriousness or earnestness to carry out the task. And that is the courage of the incumbent's conviction.

A few word about our bureaucracy, which was handed down to us as a legacy of the colonial past. After Bangladesh won its independence, the new government that started functioning already had a bureaucracy. It consisted of those public servants who had previously worked in the Pakistan government, but during and after independence had pledged their allegiance to the new Bangladesh government.

However, those who did not have serious allegations of anti-Bangladesh activities against them during the Liberation War were allowed to work under the new administration. Small wonder it was their experience in performing day-to-day administrative tasks that counted more than anything else in the continuation of their service from one government to another.

It is exactly this quality of public servants that is most desirable for executing the political dictates of the government of the day, but not their political allegiance to the party in office. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, the opposite happened. Experience or efficiency of the bureaucracy was not enough for the post-1990s political governments. They also demanded partisan loyalty from the public servants.

And so started the era of competition among the public servants to prove their allegiance to the party in power. Taking advantage of the situation, some overenthusiastic officers started to take open political stance to the dismay of the other public servants who still followed the old school of work culture where partisan loyalty had no place in their service life.

On the contrary, discipline, efficiency

and if anything, loyalty to the administrative hierarchy rather than political parties were the defining criteria of a good public servant.

Of late, that old school of public servants are marginalised. They have been outnumbered by the black crows that are pecking these white crows to death. In such a circumstance, the call for depoliticising bureaucracy is indeed reassuring.

The endeavour to enact the Civil Service Act, 2010 to replace what the Cabinet Secretary M. Abdul Aziz said were "rules and regulations" "regulating" the bureaucracy, and that "once the law is enacted, it will be a legal binding on the officials to serve the people" is, to all intents and purposes, a realisation, albeit belated, of what harm the politicians had done to the system of public administration so far.

But then, can any legal binding really compel, say, a citizen not to do a wrong or a government official not to show political bias or commit other vices like corruption, nepotism and favouritism?

Our long experience with so many good laws in the country has but left us with a different impression. It is that the political party in office must strictly observe the principle that its ministers, MPs and other leaders and activists must not under any circumstances interfere in the day-to-day activities of the public servants.

Will the Awami league-led government now in office also show its courage of conviction and stick to the principle of non-interference in the normal functioning of the bureaucracy as a first step to depoliticise it?

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## Victory for civil society and Palestine

**This is a major victory for the international civil society mobilisation against Palestine's occupation. The fact that 600 activists from over 50 countries organised the flotilla impressed many people.**

PRAFUL BIDWAI

**W**HEN Israel's leaders ordered their commandos to attack the Freedom Flotilla carrying humanitarian assistance to Gaza in international waters, they couldn't have imagined they would have to relax the three-year-old blockade in three weeks.

Yet, the global public revulsion at the murderous assault -- even among Israel's allies and supporters -- forced them to do so.

Two-thirds of Israelis disapproved of the attack. Now, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu disowns the blockade as a past inheritance -- a clear confession by a macho Right-wing leader that Israel's Gaza strategy has politically failed.

This is a major victory for the international civil society mobilisation against Palestine's occupation. The fact that 600 activists from over 50 countries organised the flotilla impressed many people.

Says Phyllis Bennis, a West Asia expert: "[G]lobal activists [took] risks on behalf of human rights that governments and the UN were unwilling to defend. It provided a powerful image of an increasingly empowered civil society with the capacity to transform events directly."

What gave the mobilisation moral legitimacy was its basically non-violent character and advocacy of international law. Bennis says: "Israel was condemned not because its commandos were mean and brutal [but] because the attack ... was a violation of international law."

Also on the winning side is Turkey. Nineteen Turks (including a Turkish-

American) were killed in the attack. Acting firmly, Turkey recalled its ambassador, cancelled military exercises with Israel, and demanded -- and obtained -- the immediate release of the captives.

Turkey has emerged from the crisis as a self-confident Middle Power with the courage to confront the US. It is looking to a more ambitious role in regional affairs. Turkey and Brazil recently agreed to give Iran medium-enriched material for its uranium reactor in return for low-enriched uranium. This will promote accountable behaviour on Iran's part.

Until recently, Turkish-Israeli military-economic relations both within and outside Nato were good. Turkey even voted for Israel's entry into the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Now, Israel has lost Turkey, its only friend in the Muslim world.

Turkey's changed posture may motivate other countries to play a less pro-US role. As will the raid's condemnation as "indecent" even by the conservative UK and French governments. The UN Security Council chair statement also unequivocally criticised the attack. Malaysia and Ireland have stepped up humanitarian efforts for Gaza.

The flotilla massacre highlights the cruelty and inhumanity of the Gaza blockade. This is collective punishment of a people under military occupation, prohibited under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The blockade followed Israel's invasion of Gaza in December 2008, which killed 1,400 people and damaged or destroyed 11,000 houses, 105 factories, 20 hospitals

and clinics, besides 159 schools and educational institutions. Some 51,800 people were displaced, while 20,000 remain homeless. Israel permits virtually no reconstruction.

Says a former head of the UN reconstruction agency: "Gaza is on the threshold of becoming the first territory to be intentionally reduced to a state of abject destitution, with the knowledge, acquiescence and -- some would say -- encouragement of the international community."

Israel's list of lawless acts is long; ignoring Security Council resolutions; occupying territories in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria; assassinating political opponents; collaborating with apartheid South Africa on nuclear weapons; wrecking the Oslo process and expanding illegal settlements.

Israel has got away with this behaviour primarily because of US support. This is a hangover from the Cold War, when Israel was an important strategic asset. It no longer is. Zionist influence in the US is now declining. About half of recent US anti-occupation demonstrators were Jews.

By not condemning Israel's flotilla attack, the US lost an opportunity to earn goodwill in the Islamic world. If the US persists with its present policy, including a \$30 billion 10-year aid package to Israel, the political costs of apologising for Israel could become exorbitant. This may hopefully drum sense into Washington's policymakers.

The relaxation of the Gaza blockade won't change ground realities -- barring a minor improvement in food availability and living conditions. Israel will still control Gaza's borders and airspace, and movement of people and goods. But as a Gazan puts it: "[We] don't want money. We need to be free .... People in Gaza are like you -- not from another planet."

The relaxation's real impact will be political. Israel will increasingly be seen as

a state with roguish proclivities. This will accelerate worldwide recognition that Israel's occupation of Palestine is unjust, illegal and cruel, and reinforce its isolation.

The isolation began with the bestial Sabra-Chatilla massacres in Palestinian refugee camps in 1982. A turning point was the first Intifadah of the late 1980s, during which Palestinian children fought Israeli tanks with stones.

Those images transformed the world's perception of Israel: from a tiny nation threatened by hostile neighbours, to a ruthless aggressor. The 2008 invasion of Gaza further confirmed Israel's criminality. After the flotilla episode, Israel will be increasingly regarded as a pariah or outlaw, which must be reined in -- just as apartheid South Africa was.

UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories Richard Falk says: "[The] surfacing of criminal charges against Israel during and after its attacks on Gaza resulted in major gains on the legitimacy front for the Palestinians. The widespread popular perceptions of Israeli criminality, especially the sense of waging war against a defenceless population with modern weaponry, has prompted people around the world to propose boycotts, divestments and sanctions" (BDS).

The BDS campaign is gathering strength in many countries -- but, regrettably, not in South Asia. India in particular is building close relations with Israel. This is a historic blunder. New Delhi must correct course -- radically and quickly. To start with, it must press for an independent external inquiry into the flotilla attack.

But India won't revise its Israel policy unless its political parties, civil society and intellectuals launch a powerful BDS campaign. This must demand a complete cessation of military purchases and joint ventures with Israel, a boycott of Israeli products, and tough sanctions.

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