

After the JU clashes...

Home minister must face facts and act

WE are surprised at home minister Sahara Khatun's remarks made in the wake of Monday's infighting in Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) on the Jahangirnagar University (JU) campus. It's hard to make out the purported meaning of her statement, "what am I to do, if something happens (to the contrary) in spite of my orders (for police action)?"

Is the home minister not living in the world of make-believe by saying that 'they say, Shibir elements have infiltrated into the BCL ranks' implying that the 'real BCL' is not responsible for the interne-cine feuds including the latest JU clashes over turf and sharing of the spoils?

Perhaps, it is due to a firm belief with her as well as other ruling party leaders that it's not the BCL but alien elements within it that are behind all the mischief. What is worse, she even tried to excuse the police's delay in timely intervention in the JU clashes. These go down as an instance of public posturing, which, at the same time, is also self-defeating.

However, reports have it that 16 BCL men have been arrested from the JU campus. We believe a proper investigation and follow up should now lead to unravelling of the truth.

In this column, we have already expressed our concern over the government's 'lack of seriousness and inaction' in the face of the excesses committed by the BCL cadres, especially in connection with the latest spate of violence on the JU campus. But we think that the home minister should rather choose her words in a way that reflects her self-confidence as well as being always abreast of the ground realities.

But after the JU fallout, what we are witnessing are not only prevarications, but also attempts at pointing to proverbial ghost in the exorcist's bag. Even if for argument's sake it is assumed that there has been Shibir infiltration in BCL, then what happens to its (BCL'S) legacy as a student body with secular traditions ultimately reflecting on the image of the Awami League?

The home minister as the one to look after the overall law and order needs to deal with the issues at hand judiciously and unflinchingly in pursuit of the spirit and letter of law.

National Museum

Another wakeup call for improved security and maintenance

THE National Museum, a repository of our heritage and history, is finding it difficult to protect its priceless artefacts. Only that can explain why nine gold medals and 17 antique silver coins have disappeared from gallery 21. It is a clear case of theft and what is even more intriguing is that the stolen coins have been replaced with bronze and silver replicas! It smacks of a neatly executed plan where the involvement of 'insiders' is far too evident.

It is not the first time that the museum has discovered such loss of its valuable possessions. In December 2007, two Gupta era statues were stolen from the airport just before these were being flown to Paris. It is obvious that a gang of thieves took full advantage of the lax security arrangements.

The museum authorities have admitted that some insiders are responsible for the loss of the artefacts. However, people would like to know what they have done so far with such 'insiders' to prevent the pilferage. It is really surprising to learn that they do not even know the exact number of artefacts stolen so far. And they have not maintained an inventory worth the name since 1982! It only shows that the burglary in 1991 and disappearance of statues from the airport in 2007 were not enough to make them realise that the highly damaging thefts had to be stopped.

The museum set up in 1913 has quite a rich collection of things that take us back to the individuals and episodes of the past and help us develop a sense of history. Some of the artefacts have very high sale value in the international market, which definitely calls for much better surveillance, security and preservation arrangements at the museum. The museum authorities have claimed that they do not have the manpower needed to run the organisation. Even if there is truth in it, nothing can alter the fact that they have failed to protect our national assets. It is not clear why the much needed staff could not be recruited, when the museum was not functioning smoothly. To complain about their own limitations, or to blame the insiders, after we have lost so many valuable articles, really sounds like a belated and feeble response to an important matter. The plain and simple truth is that the museum officials and employees have failed to discharge their duties.

The government has to look into the matter and take corrective steps before more artefacts vanish into thin air. The National Museum is too important a place to be left to a bunch of incompetent and unreliable people. Meanwhile, the public would like to see energetic efforts to recover the lost antiques.



Time to mend fences.

The border bind

Pending final resolution of the outstanding matters, the existing mechanism should be made use of to manage the border, including the 1974 guidelines and the JWG, and it is thus inexplicable that the JWG has not found time to meet since 2006.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IF there is one prickly issue between Bangladesh and India that refuses to go away it is the seemingly intractable matters related to the border. These have an uncanny propensity to regurgitate with disconcerting regularity. And every so often a new phenomenon is added, as the recent one shows.

In Jaintiapur border area we have had a new problem to contend with, that of armed Indian Khasias intruding into our territory with firearms, and attacking Bangladeshi civilians and forcibly tilling our land. It was the local people that chased out the intruders who had encroached as much as 200 meters inside Bangladesh.

As it is, civilian casualties due to BSF firing have caused embarrassment to Sheikh Hasina's government. One had expected, given the surge of goodwill following the new political dispensations in the two countries in early 2009, that BSF's trigger-happy tendency would be curbed. But it has increased and with it the number of casualties on the Bangladesh side. The newest feature, armed encroachment by Indian civilians, has added a new problem for

Bangladesh, in particular the BDR.

Apparently, there is disconnect between the policy makers in New Delhi and the operational level of the Indian border force; not everything that is contemplated at the highest level trickles down to the ground level. Had that not been the case, the idea of unilateral moratorium on BSF shooting articulated in public by the Indian home secretary in December 2009, would have been reflected in the attitude and behaviour of the Indian border guards. Some observers think that the BSF attitude has hardened since 2002, after the Padua incident.

The Jaintiapur incident has had an adverse impact, both on the image of the government and the BDR. While the government has been piqued enough to convey its feelings to the Indian high commissioner (it should have been done by the foreign minister/ministry ideally) the ire of the locals, at the perceived inaction of our border force to dissuade the encroachers physically or through the intervention of the BSF, was demonstrated by their setting upon a border post of the BDR in the locality and barricading the highway between Sylhet and the Dawki border.

For any government there cannot be

anything worse than to have its citizens doubt its capacity, or its readiness, to guarantee their physical security. This not only saps public confidence on the government, it also harms the government's credibility as well as generate misgivings among the neighbours.

One understands the compulsion of the BDR to exercise utmost restraint in this case, particularly when it is the lives of civilians that were at stake. But discretion is the better part of valour only when it doesn't cost the lives of own people or the credibility of the state's capacity to protect them from external hostility.

While the good intentions of the Bangladesh government should be appreciated, the lack of reciprocity on the part of the BSF is regrettable, as also its expressed unwillingness to stop its citizens from violating the border. And this lends a new twist to the issue.

The Jaintiapur incident should be contextualised in the framework of the entire issue of border management, with the three major border issues as a background. The first and foremost is the matter of border demarcation that still remain incomplete in respect of only 6.5 kilometers of the border, and that includes a land stretch and two water stretches.

There are 111 enclaves spread over 17,150 acres in Bangladesh and 51 enclaves spread over 7,110 acres in India. Regrettably, a mutually agreed solution of the matter has not found a consensual expression. The idea of exchanging enclaves, although bandied

about at high levels occasionally, has not been seriously discussed between the two parties.

A possible solution articulated by a senior Bangladeshi diplomat, to turn the de facto into de jure, is worth a look; the guiding factor is that people who are already settled there should not be disturbed.

However, the thorniest of the issues is the case of land in adverse possession. Officially, there are 3,500 acres of Indian territory in Bangladesh's possession and 3,024 acres of Bangladeshi territory in India's possession. And pending a mutual agreement the status quo should not be disturbed.

But when the BSF says that they have no authority to prevent Indians tilling there "own land," as reported in some sections of the media, the accusation, that the Indian encroachment and incursions into Bangladesh has BSF patronisation, appears to have some merit. It also means that the joint border agreement of 1974 is being sidelined.

We have often said in these columns that the Bangla-India border issues have to be tackled with sensitivity. Pending final resolution of the outstanding matters, the existing mechanism should be made use of to manage the border, including the 1974 guidelines and the JWG, and it is thus inexplicable that the JWG has not found time to meet since 2006. We are happy to note that it is likely to meet in the next few months.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc (Retd) is editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Tackling street homelessness

The state of these extremely poor people is so bad, and they live in such inhuman conditions in Dhaka city that it can't be believed by anybody who didn't see the conditions that prevail there.

Z.A.M. KHAIRUZZAMAN

THERE has been an alarming rise in the number of pavement dwellers in the capital and other cities. As roughly estimated, each night 15,000 to 20,000 of these extremely poor people, from children to adults, have to make the streets of Dhaka their home.

The number of pavement dwellers rises day by day as many families have no alternative but to migrate to the capital from their villages in rural areas for livelihood and shelter. They take shelter on the streets and become subjects of multifarious torture, oppression, exploitation and abuse. They live and grow up on the margins of the society in a state of neglect, deprived of affection, normal parental and family care and guidance.

These unfortunate countrymen have no access to basic services and entitlements like health care and elementary education, and live in conditions that are undesirable by any standard. They remain the most vulnerable

group, and no development effort reaches them due to lack of a necessary attention to their status. In other countries of the world, city corporations usually take the responsibility for attending to the inhuman living conditions of that section of the society.

In this context, Concern Worldwide Bangladesh and Irish Aid, as notable development partners of the country, have come forward to attend to their needs and prepare a model on how the issue can be addressed. The assistance is through a five-year project, titled "Amrao Manush," that started in March 2008.

The goal of the project is to support 10,000 pavement dwellers through a number of pavement dwellers' centres, providing them with ten most essential services that would practically give them the opportunity for a better future.

The project is being implemented in partnership with the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and other development organisations -- Sajida

Foundation (SF), Social and Economic Enhancement Program (SEEP), Nari Maitree (NM) and Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP).

So far, ten pavement dwellers' centres (PDC) have been established -- at Karwan Bazar, Kamalapur Railway Station, Sadarghat, area near the Dhaka Stadium, Supreme Court, Osmani Udyan, Green Road, Mirpur Mazar, Mirpur Stadium and Mouchak.

Ten most essential services are being rendered to the identified pavement dwellers from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm. These services include healthcare, toilet facilities, arrangement for cooking, daytime rest, non-formal education for children, daycare for children of the working street women, awareness programs, counseling, technical and vocational training, and locker facility for savings and belongings. The project activities include social and policy advocacy for due governmental attention and change of social attitude in their favors.

The state of these extremely poor people is so bad, and they live in such inhuman conditions in Dhaka city that it can't be believed by anybody who didn't see the conditions that prevail there.

The coverage under the Amrao

Manush project is, of course, not enough, but it is proving its worth as a successful model. DCC should sustain the process and take adequate measures to contain the issue and set up more night shelters with essential services for pavement dwellers said Mostafa Quaium Khan, the executive director of CUP.

It may be noted that India has set up suitable night shelters for pavement dwellers in Delhi. The measure has been taken by the Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) in collaboration with Ashroy Odhikar Ovijan, a local NGO engaged in maintenance of the shelters, he said. The civil society as well as the better-off sections of our society should also be more considerate and generous and give due recognition to the rights and entitlements of the pavement dwellers, he added.

Rights activist Dr. Nazrul Islam said that today's street children, if not given due attention, may turn into a huge and unmanageable social burden and risk later. On the other hand, if these children could grow up properly, they might become worthy citizens, he added.

Z.A.M. Khairuzzaman is a journalist. E-mail: khairiz@yahoo.com.