

When custodians become predators

A good move to make law enforcers accountable

IT is perhaps for the first time in our history that a police officer along with ten policemen of Singra Police Station in Natore, have been sent to jail for killing a man in so-called crossfire while in their custody. We welcome the news with the hope that it will be the start of what we have been calling for so long establishing accountability of the police. We hope too that this will also be the end of the brazen violation of human rights and rule of law that such killings amount to.

The noticeable aspect of the case is that it was confirmed prima-facie through a judicial enquiry that established the fact that the victim was killed in police custody. One wonders whether this might have been possible if the enquiry was confined at the departmental level, which more often than not tries to find loopholes in the allegation, and the enquiry, if at all, is conducted in a manner intended to save the accused rather than unearth the truth.

It is with deep concern that we have been noticing the spiraling incidents of extra-judicial killings in the name of crossfire deaths and deaths in police custody. And we are happy to note that the highest judiciary of the country has not only taken cognizance of the matter but has also acted on it. While upbraiding the law enforcing agencies for the killings and seeking explanation of the three deaths recently in police custody in Dhaka, the High Court was constrained to remark that the law enforcing agencies did not have the right to kill anyone in custody, not even one accused of murder.

There is nothing worse than to have the agencies entrusted to protect people's lives become the predators. We feel that this is a good beginning to establish the regime of accountability, particularly of those that are supposed to guarantee the citizens their personal security. We feel that not only will this set the right example for all, the fact that the law enforcers have been made to go through the rigours of law will enhance the dignity of the legal process; it will certainly boost people's confidence in it to see that nobody is above the law, and that all transgressions, whoever causes it, shall have to be accounted for.

We hope that the process initiated by the judiciary will be carried forward, and all such killings by police and RAB so far, be accounted for in the same manner.

Curtain drawn on football razzmatazz

A brilliant Spanish coup

SPAIN'S clean and compact football finally triumphed over the Dutch firepower and agility, after a long fight that looked like being drawn into the penalty shootouts. Spanish midfielder Andres Iniesta scored the winning goal just four minutes before the end of extra time, leaving a frustrated Netherlands with very little to do, especially when they were reduced to ten men.

The match was very much unlike the Spaniards' neat encounter with the Germans in the semifinal when they managed to strategically outplay their fiercely counter-attacking rivals. The Germans could not play their natural game, allowing the Spanish to dominate the show right from the beginning. Nevertheless, it was clean and highly technical football, every bit of which was enjoyable. But the final, which had generated so much enthusiasm, appeared to be rather antithetical, with rough tackling by the players making it more of a brawl at times than deft maneuvering for the possession of the ball.

The Spanish had a slight edge but most of their moves fizzled out due to poor marksmanship. Maybe, the teams were under tremendous psychological pressure as the expectations of their fans were huge. The spectators were disappointed with the way the strikers failed to make anything out of the dangerous looking situations.

Refereeing in this World Cup left much to be desired. England was deprived of a sure goal in their match against Germany. And Mexico was the victim of a wrong decision when they lost to Argentina. Human errors are perhaps not easy to eliminate altogether. So, the FIFA bosses should think seriously whether they could install electronic devices to make sure that gross mistakes by the referees do not botch up important matches. It is not enough to apologise after throwing a team out.

This World Cup will be remembered for many reasons. Spain has won the title for the first time and the continent of Africa has organised it for the first time too. South Africa has proved that as a country it is capable of organising any big event. Finally, Europeans have reason to be happy as they prevailed over the Latin soccer powers and took the first three positions.

For us here in Bangladesh, it has been a month of watching and speculating about football, though the exit of Argentina and then Brazil left the local fans in a state of shock. Nevertheless, the true lovers of the game did not give up, they enjoyed the game till the very last minute. Football today is more than a sport, it is bringing people from all the continents close to each other.



Struggling to stay afloat.

Ticking time-bomb

They seem to be groping in the dark in search of an answer. But, already it is too late for any answer. It is time to look ahead. It is time to start all over again, with greater vigour, if we do not want to see this country sinking into the Bay of Bengal from the weight of 30 or 40 crore people.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

ON Sunday, July 11, around noon, a feature program on family planning was shown on PTV of Pakistan on the occasion of World Population Day 2010. Coming from a conservative society where religious leaders have considerable clout over issues like family planning and use of contraceptives, I was quite intrigued. I gave my full attention to the PTV program.

In the feature, some lady doctors and female health workers were shown explaining to female clinic visitors the issue of family planning and how to use contraceptives. The doctors and health workers explained the importance of adopting modern family planning methods and the importance of birth spacing for the health of the mothers. They also gave prenatal advice to the pregnant women who conceived for the first time. A long queue of women was shown waiting outside for their turn.

The feature also mentioned how Marie Stopes Society, a private sector health NGO, has been giving services concerning family planning that included counselling and supplying contraceptives etc., under a bigger family planning and population control program of the Pakistan government.

It came as a big surprise to me that such clinics worked on family planning issues in

Pakistan where dangerously armed militant groups roamed the streets of cities and towns. The religious leaders there (as they do in Bangladesh) give fatwa against family planning using modern methods, calling it un-Islamic.

Now, let us have a look at the Population Policy of Pakistan. Some salient points from official websites are produced below.

"Continuing high population growth will amount to Pakistan's population reaching 220 million by the year 2020. Coupled with poor human development indicators such as low literacy, high infant mortality and low economic growth rates, such a large population will undermine efforts being undertaken to reduce poverty and to improve the standards of living of the populace.

"While Population Growth Rate (PGR) has declined from over 3% in previous decades to its current level of 2.1% per annum, Pakistan still has an unacceptably high rate of growth compared to other developing countries. Therefore the government of Pakistan is attaching the highest priority to the lowering of PGR from its current level to 1.9% per annum and to reaching replacement level of fertility by the year 2020.

"Pakistan is faced with its ever-largest adolescent population, because of its high levels of fertility over the last few decades and its very recent fertility decline. The adolescent population, in the age group of

15-24, as it enters into its reproductive phase embodies potential population growth for several decades. It constitutes population momentum in the future that has serious implications for provision of schooling, health services and other basic amenities of life for the coming decades.

"The Population Welfare Program has been able to create universal awareness about family planning with the current contraceptive prevalence rate of 30%. The challenge is to ensure continuous use by current users and increase existing CPR by meeting the percent unmet need for family planning services of currently married women along with sustaining the demand of new entrants in the reproductive age group.

"The dynamics of Pakistan's demographic variables compel that a vigilant eye be kept on the phenomena of population growth. The Population Policy of Pakistan 2002 is in congruence with the ICPD paradigm shift to holistic care of the family, client-centered quality care in family planning and RH. The government's Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Population Sector Perspective Plan 2012 framework sets out improvements in the quality of life of all persons, including children, adolescents, adults, elderly, both male and female.

"The Planning Commission had allocated an amount of Rs.9.5 billion for the Three-Year Development Plan (2002-2005) an average of over 3 billion per annum. Keeping this as a bench-mark, implementation of the Population Policy would require a financial input of Rs.24 billion for the remaining 8 years of Perspective Plan 2012 and subsequently another Rs.16 billion at a declining rate of Rs.2 billion per annum till the year 2020. Hence a total of Rs.49.5 billion requirements are estimated for the next 19 years for achieving the fertility replacement perceived under the

Population Policy by the year 2020. Major part of the financial inputs will cover the provision of subsidised contraceptives to the clients, service delivery, training, advocacy, and research and to cover human resource and infrastructure gaps essential for achieving the population policy objectives."

Well, the goals and how to reach the goals as given in the population policy of Pakistan read similar to the policy of Bangladesh. Both countries are burdened with a huge population boom that should have been prevented from happening through adopting modern methods and lifestyle as early as the '70s and '80s. Failure of the successive governments only can explain the debacle.

I wonder how our political leaders stay so nonchalant, so unperturbed, so unstirred, after reading the facts and figures concerning the horrendous problems that an unmanageable population would cause? In terms of shelter, food, water, land, health, hygiene, education, employment and law and order, governance would be a nightmarish experience for the future governments. To be candid, 30 crore people in their frantic bid to survive in this small country in 2050 will blame the present day politicians for their inaction.

Today, on the World Population Day 2010, our government officials still talk in a roundabout way about what has been achieved and then what went wrong in implementing the population policy. They seem to be groping in the dark in search of an answer. But, already it is too late for any answer. It is time to look ahead. It is time to start all over again, with greater vigour, if we do not want to see this country sinking into the Bay of Bengal from the weight of 30 or 40 crore people.

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Who is to be blamed for Faruque's death?

Earlier, hartal was organised by volunteers without resorting to violence. But now it is fear of violence by paid goons of political parties that keeps people away from their work. So violence has become a sad reality of hartals. However, if the hartal is justified as a democratic right, how can violence be justified?

FERDOUS RAHMAN

FARUQUE Hossain finally succumbed to his injuries on July 1 after spending five agonising days in the hospital. He had severe burns since criminals torched his car on the night before the hartal. Faruque and his friend Suman were severely burned as hartal supporters torched their car in Moghbazar by pouring petrol.

Other than this incident, a few other cars and buses were torched in different areas in Dhaka with passengers suffering serious burns. On hartal day, Abul Kashem, a superintendent engineer of PWD, was hit on the head with bricks by picketers while he was going to his office.

Hartal can no longer be seen as democratic because of its violent image, as people saw the night before the hartal. BNP called for a dawn-to-dusk hartal on June 27 to demand its 11 points, including a solution to the utility crisis, tender manipulation, and the persecution of opposition leaders and workers etc. However, none of the actions mentioned above can be made in favour of institutionalising democracy in

the country.

The dictionary meaning of hartal -- a Gujarati word -- is strike action. Initially, business people initiated it, in the form of closure of shops, warehouses, etc, to impose pressure and protest to achieve or fulfill their demands.

Historically, political hartals were a part of non-cooperative movement by people against colonial rule to realise the goals of self-government, autonomy or independence. Since the interest of colonial rulers and colonial people were diametrically opposite, hartals were inevitably used as a major instrument to demonstrate the people's united action in protest against the arbitrary powers.

Mahatma Gandhi institutionalised hartal into Indian politics in the 1920s and 1930s. It was first observed in the subcontinent as a protest to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. But after the country's independence and the emergence of Bangladesh, the context has changed and the protection and promotion of national interest has become the supreme concern for each citizen.

Though hartals are often called in the

name of the people, it's the people whose movement is restricted, their property endangered and progress curbed. It often curtails the rights of those who are not willing to participate in it. The problems with it are twofold; first, the country is set on a slippery slope and second, there is loss of life due to violence.

Earlier, hartal was organised by volunteers without resorting to violence. But now it is fear of violence by paid goons of political parties that keeps people away from their work. So violence has become a sad reality of hartals. However, if the hartal is justified as a democratic right, how can violence be justified?

Opposition parties call hartal to not only paralyse the government's administrative functions, but also disrupt private sector activities. The economy incurs huge losses due to it, which is extremely detrimental to the country's normal economic activities as large industries, factories, sea ports, railway, banks, wholesale markets, educational institutes, offices and sports are forcibly shuttered down by hartal supporters.

Other economic activities like export, import, tourism, production and normal functioning of industries are seriously disrupted. The accumulated financial losses, in terms of lost production, are huge. In addition to financial losses, people are subjected to other difficulties.

Innocent people have witnessed many such anarchic situations created in the name of exercising political rights. By forcing one to stay home on a working day,

daily wage-earners and people seeking medical help suffer most acutely.

In a democratic system, hartal must be viewed in a way that the least harm is caused to the economy and society. Here, the objective should not be to use any means to oust a legitimate government which has the backing of its people.

Hartal has lost much of its shine as a political weapon. It cannot solve civic problems faced by people. Rather, it damages the country's image, causing a huge loss to its economy. These problems can be solved in the parliament. With the peoples' expectation of a qualitative change in politics, all must avoid calling hartal. Such a call must come from a sense of urgency to keep the economy a national priority.

The peoples' welfare cannot be ensured by arson, vandalism or even hartal. With these methods, vested quarters will make the country unstable and take advantage of political gains.

If necessary, hartal must be stopped by passing a bill in parliament. India's highest court fined BJP and its close ally Shiv Sena Rs.2 million each in compensation for the loss caused to the public by a hartal that they had jointly called in Mumbai in 2003.

In this era of global competition, we must come out of the hartal mindset and collectively evolve alternative solutions. There is no denying the fact that the parliament is the right place to exercise rights and settle issues. Let's look beyond hartal for alternative political strategies.

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