

Deaths on the highway

A high-powered committee needed to deal with the situation

THIS column has on many occasions highlighted the grossly chaotic situation prevailing on the highways. There are a large number of casualties occurring everyday on the inter-district roads as a result of traffic accidents. The number of deaths in these accidents is incredibly high and totally unacceptable.

And in this regard nothing can dramatise more the unorganised, shoddily managed and poorly supervised movement of traffic on the highways than the tragedy that befell the family of the chairman of the BSCIC. In a bizarre twist of fate he was killed in a very tragic accident along with another secretary of the government when their car collided with a recklessly driven bus near Manikganj, only four months after two of his daughters were killed in a road accident. And Mr. Rahman was an avid advocate for safe roads and highways.

The two deaths, as like all others before, reflect the true scale of the problem of road safety a problem that everyone is fully aware of but apparently unable to move fast enough to stem the slide. The situation has come to such a pass that no further delay in initiating appropriate corrective measures can be countenanced. We should be aware of the fact that there is rise in the volume of highway traffic by the day adding to the already explosive situation.

These veritable death traps, which the highways have become, have very distinct features, which must be addressed specifically.

First, it is the road configuration and the attendant shortcomings, like sharp bends that are almost like blind corners, narrow roads without dividers, highways being impinged by roadside bazaars, and poor state of repair, which add to the accident potential of the highways. Secondly, many of the vehicles that ply the highways are not roadworthy, and last but not the least, the drivers mostly are unskilled and untrained, having obtained their license through underhand means.

To add to these is the poor legal framework under which the accident cases are handled. The penalty, (when the defaulter is apprehended, if at all) for causing accidents and deaths is weak. The driver in most cases manages to escape and the matter eventually falls through turning it into a fiasco eventually. And this lends a feeling of impunity in the drivers.

Regrettably, the benign neglect of the government, and particularly of the R&H Department, have caused things to go from bad to worse in an ever irreversible manner. In this regard we would like to suggest that a high-level committee be formed which should review the situation in the light of the above in the entirety, and suggest measures that should be implemented on an emergency basis.

Ctg port relapsing into old ways?

Management needs to be more assertive

THE traders' impression is that Chittagong Port is getting caught up in a slow-down mode once again. Thankfully though, it is not as bad as it used to be prior to the preceding caretaker government's efficiency enhancing drive. The average turnaround time in port handling has increased to five-six days from what had accelerated to two-four days during caretaker regime. As a result, extra Tk50crore is being coughed up by the port users in surcharges.

The dip in turnaround time was more than 10 days prior to the reform initiative. That the port had not slumped to its worst is little solace because it seems that workers' unrest is on a comeback trail. This is the right time to roll back the negative trend in efficiency with some assertive and astute management coming into play.

The issue centres around a single point operation system replacing the 21-year old stevedoring system in which 22 politically associated trade unions and stevedores pulled in different directions, thereby sapping port efficiency. Also in the process of the switch-over, 4000 workers were retrenched. Now that the three-year contract with the berth operators ended on May 16 this year, there is a regrouping of workers to reinstate the sacked workers. The importers alleged that there is the problem of corruption with workers demanding money at every point. With the elected government in power, the pressure of politicisation has grown as the CPA is working to activate "the central booking cell" by empowering the worker's leaders. The port users are opposed to this.

Just as overstaffing is undesirable, so are also corruption and other forms of malpractice for which the port authority can also be blamed. Besides, there is a persistent resistance from the workers to modernising the port handling capacities. We are for trade union rights but there must be one CBA in place of two or three for which the labour law needs to be reformed. True, we need to strike a balance between the welfare of the workers and the interest of the businessmen but nothing that compromises the efficiency of the port should get the better of the government's best judgement.



Who represents garment workers?

To all appearances, the garment workers are not being properly represented during any talks, either with factory owners or the government. And this single factor apparently lies behind all the confusion, fears and uncertainties, and the resulting chaos in the industry.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

WHAT is happening in the garment sector? The garment workers have grown restive and violence-prone even after the announcement of the minimum wage for the workers by the government in concurrence with the owners of garment and knitwear industries.

We witnessed their madness in Gazipur and in the capital on the day following announcement of the minimum wage (Friday). They rampaged through the roads and damaged vehicles plying the roads in the Mohakhali, Tejgaon, Banani, ransacked roadside shops and looted many of those.

The manner in which the violence broke out raised many eyebrows. The police, the garment industry leaders and even some labour leaders disapproved of the way the garment workers went ahead with their destructive activities, rejecting the just announced minimum wage structure at Tk.3,000 and demanding Tk.5,000 as the minimum wage instead. The government is of the view that outside forces are behind this anarchy in the garment sector.

Meanwhile, the violence spread to Ashulia in Savar and Narayanganj on Saturday. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has issued stern warning against the trouble-makers, who, she said, were out to foil the trial of the war criminals.

After Friday's outburst in the capital and Gazipur, even some well-meaning people were suspicious of the identity of the violent demonstrators. Were all of them garment workers or were they hired goons of the vested quarters? Some of them questioned.

The government leaders have already pointed their accusing finger at the main opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami. But after further intensification and spread of the garment sector violence on Saturday, the nature of the demonstration took a fresh twist.

The demonstrators, who blocked traffic movement on the Dhaka-Narayanganj link road for more than three hours, were protesting against the arrest of Montu Ghosh, adviser to the Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra and general secretary of the Narayanganj district unit of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB).

What is more, thousands of workers came out from dozens of garment factories in Ashulia of Savar and engaged themselves in pitched battles with the police, causing injuries to hundreds of workers and police.

The entire development testified to the fact that the violent demonstrators were not outsiders. And there was no mistaking the fact that they were demonstrating against the declared minimum wage structure.

And seeing that well-known trade union leaders are also supporting the garment

workers' agitation, it becomes still harder to dismiss the latest eruption of militant demonstration and violence by the garment workers as purely the work of outside agents.

The scale and spread of the workers' agitation and violence in the garment industry is unquestionably an alarming turn of events. The violence that often broke out before were in most cases triggered by rumour over the captivity or death of their colleagues at the hands of the bullies engaged by the factory management. Sudden lockout of a factory by the management was also another reason for the wildcat agitation of the workers that took destructive form.

To be more to the point, the garment workers in those situations behaved like violent mobs as they lacked any leadership. Neither were they guided by any specific agenda.

The allegation of outside intervention to destroy Bangladesh's thriving garment industry was also being made in the case of those outbreaks of violence. And such allegations had justification in those cases.

But when the agitations were evidently driven by legitimate demands of the workers, for example, raise in pay, then the argument that outside agents are out to destroy the industry loses much of its ground.

But still one can hardly justify why the workers' agitation for higher pay or benefits should take such destructive form, especially when one sees that the workers are destroying the factories that provide them their bread.

Again, the violence that has erupted after the declaration of the minimum wage by the government raises more questions than it answers. The government made the announcement after it had discussed the issue with labour leaders and leaders of the garment industry.

Why, then, should the garment workers engage in such violence the very next day after the announcement? Were not the workers properly informed by the labour leaders about the minimum wage announcement? For one could notice a sense of frustration and desperation in the behaviour of the angry workers.

There is clearly a serious information gap between workers and their putative leaders who represented them at the talks with government and of course the industry management. The argument gets more credence when one hears complaint from the agitating workers that they have been betrayed.

Who betrayed them? With whom then the government and the industry leaders talked as workers' representatives when the minimum wage was being fixed?

To all appearances, the garment workers are not being properly represented during any talks, either with factory owners or the government. And this single factor apparently lies behind all the confusion, fears and uncertainties, and the resulting chaos in the industry.

So, the government, the industry leaders and all others concerned must first ensure that the workers are being properly represented during any deal with the factory management, or the industry leaders or the government. That calls for the growth of healthy trade unions in the industry.

Strikes, demonstrations or any other form of workers' movement would take organised shape only when those are guided by proper leadership. Otherwise, it becomes an amorphous and chaotic mob. And the industry then turns into a happy hunting ground of the outside agents who have an axe to grind.

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BJP stoops to a new low

No party, barring the Shiv Sena, has stooped as low as the BJP in shielding a gravely indicted leader. Mr. Shah's defences are expected to be demolished by "encounter specialist" and former Deputy SP N.K. Amin -- who witnessed the crimes in question and is turning approver.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE Bharatiya Janata Party periodically behaves as if it has come unhinged. This typically happens on trademark issues of faith, which pit it against the rest of the political spectrum barring the Shiv Sena.

Examples are the Babri Masjid, where it insisted, despite lack of historical evidence, that a temple was destroyed; making Saraswati vandana compulsory in schools; rewriting textbooks along communal lines; and defending Mr. Narendra Modi for the 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat.

Now, the BJP has come unhinged on another issue: governance in "Hindutva laboratory" Gujarat. It's shielding Junior Home Minister Amit Shah for plotting the 2005 murder of Sohrabuddin Shaikh, a petty criminal, his wife Kausarbi, and eyewitness Tulsidas Prajapati. Mr. Shah brazenly evaded arrest for two days after the Central Bureau of Investigation charged him last week.

The BJP claims that the "partisan" CBI framed Mr. Shah at the Centre's behest. But the BJP has often demanded CBI investigations into recent scams. Besides, the Gujarat government has admitted to the Supreme Court that Sohrabuddin was killed in a fake encounter.

It's the Supreme Court, not the CBI, which initiated the Sohrabuddin investigation. The CBI used evidence from the Gujarat police to conclude that Mr. Shah plotted the killings.

After the chargesheet was filed, Mr. Shah should have faced arrest and trial. He was

tasked with defending the rule of law, but brazenly violated it and defied constitutional legality.

No party, barring the Shiv Sena, has stooped as low as the BJP in shielding a gravely indicted leader. Mr. Shah's defences are expected to be demolished by "encounter specialist" and former Deputy SP N.K. Amin who witnessed the crimes in question and is turning approver.

Consider the bare facts. In November 2005, the Gujarat police abducted Sohrabuddin -- a small-time extortionist and money collector for Mr. Shah and Vanzara. They called him a Lashkar-e-Toiba operative who planned to assassinate Mr. Modi.

Gujarat DIG and "encounter specialist" DG Vanzara and SP Rajkumar Pandian killed Sohrabuddin in cold blood because he had become inconvenient for Vanzara's extortion racket. Branding him a terrorist would help glorify Mr. Modi. Eyewitnesses Kausarbi and Prajapati were killed later.

The CBI says it has unimpeachable evidence of Mr. Shah's complicity in these killings, including records of his cellphone conversations with Vanzara.

The charges against Mr. Shah may be inaccurate, even false. That can only be established in his trial. But it's indisputable that he organised the transfer of Vanzara and other policemen to stage "encounters," and ran a large-scale extortion racket with Vanzara and company.

According to the CBI, many people paid them millions in bribes to stage fake encounters or get trumped-up charges dropped. Mr.

Shah also covered up the Rs.1,030 crore Madhavpur Bank fraud by a notorious stockmarket scamster, Ketan Parekh. Gujarat's Criminal Investigation Department had found that Mr. Shah helped Parekh jump bail for a Rs.2.5 crore bribe. It recommended a CBI investigation.

The BJP's hysterical pro-Shah campaign has again proven it the Odd Man Out of Indian politics. Its Hindutva project is uniquely sectarian -- it rejects India's multi-religious, plural and secular character -- and it unreasonably claims that it's a victim of the system.

The BJP's appetite for contrived victimhood is limitless. When faced with reasoned criticism from secularists writing in the English-language press, the BJP for decades accused it of visceral hostility.

It nurtures victimhood even when unleashing violence or calumny against the religious minorities, which it terms invaders and aggressors. There's an intimate connection between manufactured victimhood and violence, seen as "well-deserved" retribution.

That's why the BJP defends "Sadhi" Pragya Singh Thakur, Lt-Col Shrikant Purohit and Abhinav Bharat activists, all involved in the Hindutva-inspired terrorist network responsible for explosions in mosques/dargahs in Hyderabad and Ajmer (2007), Malegaon (2008), and possibly, the Samjhauta Express (2007).

At the heart of this well-ramified network are current and former Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh members committed to a Hindu rashtra, including Ramchandra Kalsangra, Sunil Joshi, Pravin Mutalik and Dayanand Pandey. They made, transported and planted explosives targeting ordinary Muslims.

The CBI believes the network murdered Mhow-based RSS pracharak Sunil Joshi in 2007 just when investigators were closing in on him.

This network is more dangerous than the

jehadi outfits that killed innocent people in "retaliation" for the persecution of Muslims since the 1993 Mumbai blasts because of its Hindu majoritarianism and infiltration into the police.

This network must be ruthlessly punished. The BJP, RSS and their cohorts defend it and obstruct its prosecution. This defence is as condemnable as the BJP's pro-Shah campaign.

The BJP knows the case against Mr. Shah would eventually implicate Mr. Modi. It's Mr. Modi who executed the police transfers that Mr. Shah recommended.

Mr. Modi is indispensable to the BJP. He's its longest-serving chief minister and the number one leader after Mr. Advani.

Astonishingly, BJP chief spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad and senior leaders Arun Jaitley and Sushma Swaraj rant that Sohrabuddin was a terrorist. Even if this is true, it can't justify his non-judicial execution. Civilised societies put criminals on trial, they don't summarily kill them.

Justifying non-judicial killings in "extreme" or "exceptional" cases is a slippery slope. It means granting the police impunity and condoning murder. No citizen can be safe in such a society. The BJP must answer if that's the kind of society it wants.

Deep at work here is the BJP's notion of democracy as a mere instrument of power, to be used through elections. This view undermines the content of democracy -- rule of law, human rights and constitutional freedoms -- and is incompatible with a civilised social order.

The BJP is increasingly isolating itself from the aspirations and concerns of the Indian people, including the middle class, its sole (and shrinking) constituency.

As it gets Modi-fied, the BJP forfeits its claim to being a party which abides by the law of the land and the ground-rules of democracy. Such a party can only have a bleak future.

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