

Unbearable traffic situation

Special arrangements needed to ease it

TRAFFIC jam, a source of constant worry to the city commuters, has assumed unmanageable proportions, particularly over the last two days as multitudes of people remained stuck in the roads for hours together. The congestion looked almost insoluble as vehicles formed long queues in the main thoroughfares and there was no end to the sufferings of people.

The traffic personnel have clearly no answer to the jams that completely paralyse life in the city and bring all kinds of activities to a near standstill. The terrible situation prevailing in the city and its outskirts might push us to the brink of an economic breakdown, if it persists on the scale it did in the last two days.

The traffic managers tried to re-launch the three-lane system that introduced in the past, albeit without much success. Now the managers themselves have admitted that it might have contributed towards worsening the situation. Such experiments conducted from time to time have produced no tangible results as the main causes behind traffic jam remain squarely unaddressed. A deputy commissioner of traffic put the blame on reopening of English medium school the day before yesterday and also the town-ward swirl of people before Ramadan. There might be an element of truth in his contention, but the fact remains that no preparation was taken in anticipation of the situation to tackle it.

It is of course unlikely that the situation will improve in the foreseeable future, unless some special measures are adopted to keep things under control. The road space has not increased to keep pace with the rapid increase in number of vehicles, particularly private cars in the city. While it might not be possible to stop sale and purchase of cars, still it is imperative to keep in view the capacity of the city roads. Either we have an efficient mass transportation system or have more of by-pass roads or we go underground or have expressways. Maybe a combination of all four. These are longer term options, no doubt.

The traffic bosses have to put their heads together and find out how to deal with the long and unbearable traffic jams that are causing colossal loss to the nation in immediate terms. Short term measures like keeping certain type of vehicles off the road at least on certain days of the week should be considered seriously to bring back the missing throb to life in the city. The other imperatives are to regulate arbitrary stoppages of buses, creating more parking space and phasing out slow moving rickshaws.

Violence in the name of religion

Police should be more proactive against it

WE have no words to condemn the cowardly act of vandalising and looting the houses belonging to the members of a religious minority group, the Ahmadiyas, by some local zealots at Chandtara village of Tangail district at dead of night. All right thinking people will abhor such an act of mindless violence.

So far as the reports on the incident go, the trouble-mongers came as soon as the law-enforcers deployed there had left the place and swooped on the sleeping villagers taking advantage of their helplessness.

The circumstances of the violence make it clear that common villagers had nothing to do with the incident. It was rather the handiwork of a minuscule minority.

They chose the cover of darkness to enact their macabre act of hatred and intolerance on unsuspecting villagers.

Evidently, such senseless violence on a section of the population has been committed in contravention of the constitution, which provides that people belonging to every religious group should be able to pursue their faith in Bangladesh. Oddly enough, the dastardly attack on a religious sect has occurred at a time when the incumbent government is emphasising the secular essence of the 1972 constitution.

However, such attack on this particular religious sect by a brand of bigots and obscurantists is not quite a new experience. In the past, too, we have a few instances of such sporadic violence in different parts of the country enacted by them. The repetition of the violence after a relative lull only lays bare the fact that nothing substantial has so far been done to protect them on a sustainable basis.

But is it not the government's sacred duty to take all necessary measures to protect its citizens who are otherwise very peaceful and that their rights to exist and practice their belief are duly protected by the law?

The incident at Chandtara village in the Ghatail upazila of Tangail over construction of mosque by the community in question shows that the community is as insecure as ever. And the way the latest mayhem occurred does not also speak well of the police vigilance in the area under scrutiny.

The government, its home ministry in particular, should take serious note of Sunday's episode in the Chandtara village of Tangail and take all necessary measures to ensure adequate security in the trouble-prone villages through enhanced police vigilance. Simultaneously, the trouble-mongers should be brought to book.



Due process of law must be followed

A persistent human rights issue

It is time we take a pledge to remove the ills that foster criminalisation, which is possible provided there is strong political commitment to uproot it through participation of all the people regardless of party line, religion, language and power to influence.

Z.A. KHAN

THERE has been a spate of crimes of all kinds across the globe. The rise of social unrest is attributed to disproportionate distribution of wealth and resources, non-development, availability of firearms, and criminalisation of the society for meeting political and economic ends. These are the bare bones. To get the fuller picture we need to separate the constituent elements, which entails elaborate research.

Apparently the present government is inclined to acknowledging the necessity of resorting to cross fire or gunfight to counter criminals, militants and outlaws, as did its predecessors. This may be why extra-judicial killings continue without respite.

Custodial death, or unaccounted for death of criminals or undesirable elements, is a glaring example of unreasonable killing by a few trigger-happy law enforcers. The Awami League (AL), in one of its election pledges, stated its opposition to extra-judicial killing, terming it as a violation of human rights, but in reality its approach seems lukewarm.

In the consideration of judicial dispensation even a diehard criminal is considered to be innocent unless proved other-

wise. The recent intensification of the anti-crime drive saw an incremental rise of killing without trial. This challenges the government's commitment to human rights.

One does understand that unless some drastic punitive or intimidating actions are taken, the criminals that thrive on illegal booty will remain unstoppable in their mission to kill. I, like tens of thousands, believe that nobody is a born criminal. How does a person become criminal then?

Poverty, corruption, flawed investigation, delay in the dispensation of justice, legal loopholes, religious bias and political patronisation are but a few of the reasons behind the spurt of criminalisation in our country. The government says that these extra-judicial killings are acts of self-defence of the law enforcers, who are forced to open fire -- not to kill, but to incapacitate them so that they can be caught and brought to justice.

We are aware that the right to recognition as a person before the law and to equal protection of the law -- besides rights to life, nationality, to own property, to get education, social security, liberty, and health, without any distinction of any kind such as race, colour, religion, sex and political opin-

ion -- are enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights.

The scope and definition of right to self-defence is not adequately clear. Governments over the years have maintained a prudent silence in providing clarification. It may be because governments intend to keep us in haze so that we do not knock the door of justice to seek redemption.

The government has been heard to be asking about the rights of those killed by the criminals. While free use of arms by anybody is opposed by most in no uncertain terms, it, of course, should not absolve the government of its responsibility to ensure justice and fair play by merely posing counter question. The government should be more up and about to bring them to justice instead of killing them.

Militant activities by criminals of all hues are on the rise. We must focus on the rise in criminalisation, and think dispassionately about how to address this nerve-racking problem. If I were to be asked for suggestion to strike at the root of the growth of criminalisation, I would give topmost priority to good governance, quick dispensation of justice, freeing administration from the nagging political interference, decentralised planning, devolution of power and local participation in the implementation of development plans.

I would also suggest strengthening of local government, which may play a positive role in preventing the floating population from going to urban areas to stay in slums, which are breeding grounds of criminals. If the slum dwellers cannot be relocated to a reasonable housing areas, living conditions in slum must be improved and arrangement

should be made to monitor the activities of the suspects.

NGO's engaged in the rural development should be advised to focus their attention to improve living conditions in the urban slums. Underprivileged children should be provided with appropriate vocation so that they do not fall easy prey to the criminals. Godfathers must be crushed regardless of their status and stature.

It is time we take a pledge to remove the ills that foster criminalisation, which is possible provided there is strong political commitment to uproot it through participation of all the people regardless of party line, religion, language and power to influence. Sweeping powers should be used prudently, and their use should be probed to apportion blame so that whom does not replace justice.

Officials of the republic who violate human rights should be publicly prosecuted. An order for departmental probe and closing of alleged persons may, for a while, mute public rage but will cost dearly if the investigation records are shelved. Unfortunately, not a single major violation of human rights has been investigated into with the commitment to reveal the truth.

This probably is the reason that we see a spurt in both extra-judicial killing and murder of all sorts. It is noteworthy that awareness in this regard is on the rise, and our media is playing a salutary role in drawing attention of all concerned to seek accountability for extra-judicial killings, and in asking the government to bring the criminals to justice.

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India seeks an exalted global profile

India will be ultimately judged by the world not on the basis of GDP growth, IT achievements or number of billionaires, but success in combating poverty, creating a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood, and making a better world possible.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

A characteristic of India's ruling elite is its insatiable appetite for symbols of grandeur and obsession with exclusivity. Witness the jubilation over India joining the global Nuclear Club, New Delhi's smug satisfaction at being invited into the Group of 20, and its tireless effort to get a permanent Security Council seat.

Such craving for status comes naturally to our upper crust which spends millions of rupees on exhibitionist weddings and local gymkhana or golf course membership. Status fetishism drives it to buy its children's admissions to super-exclusive schools.

Of a piece with this is New Delhi's decision to create a new sign for the Rupee. "With this", said Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, the Rupee "will join the select club of currencies such as the U.S. Dollar, British Pound sterling, Euro and the Japanese Yen...." Even China's Yuan doesn't enjoy such status.

It's doubtful if the new Rupee symbol "captures the Indian ethos", as claimed. It's an amalgam of the Roman and Devanagari scripts and lacks high recognition value given the world's unfamiliarity with Devanagari.

The Dollar, Pound and Yen have been convertible for decades. The Euro sign is new, but its stylised "e" conveys continuity with the Greek letter epsilon and with the European civilisational heritage. The Rupee sign lacks such attributes.

It's hard to see the world readily adopting a new sign for a non-convertible currency in

which very little trade occurs. India's foreign trade represents only 1.3 percent of the global total in contrast to the US's or China's one-tenth.

Currencies in which governments hold their foreign reserves, and oil, gas, minerals and metals are traded, enjoy a special status. Here, the Dollar remains dominant although the Euro is growing.

China has just displaced Japan as the world's Number Two economy. If China sells off its enormous \$2 trillion-plus holdings of US government bonds, it can cause the US economy's collapse. Yet, the Yuan isn't the world's reserve currency. And India's GDP is only one-fourth that of China.

The Rupee symbol, then, is less about global acceptance of India's economic superpowerdom than about its ruling elite's grandiose self-image. The world sees India as an emerging power, not even as The Next China. China is an industrial and manufacturing giant. India isn't. India is seen as and in reality, remains a poor country.

However, New Delhi's policy-makers obsessively want to raise India's profile. Consider India's hubris-driven attempt to transform itself from an official development assistance (ODA) recipient to an aid-donor.

The attempt goes back to the India Development Initiative announced in 2003, when India kicked out all aid-donors barring six US, UK, Russia, Germany, Japan and the European Union (EU). It declared it wouldn't accept tied aid. And it launched a tiny ODA programme for poorer countries.

The BJP-led government did this in a fit of pique at the worldwide criticism of the 2002

Gujarat pogrom and some EU countries' effort to fund the victims' rehabilitation. The move was political. Thus, US and Russian aid was retained although it's minuscule. But substantial Dutch and Nordic aid was stopped.

This is morally reprehensible. A government which has failed to eradicate poverty and huge income divides in 60 years has no right to refuse aid which could benefit the poor.

The United Progressive Alliance continued this policy. In 2004, it launched a power-projection drive by sending relief material in naval ships to several tsunami-affected countries.

India has since stepped up loan guarantees, technical training and ODA to some poorer countries. This was done partly to balance growing Chinese influence in Africa. But China is in an altogether different league. Its ODA is \$25 billion. India's is under \$1 billion.

Yet, India continues to depend on aid, including annual \$2-billion bilateral assistance. Some of this is well-targeted: two-thirds of British aid goes to health and education. India is also the World Bank group's biggest borrower, on which for the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission and metro railway depend.

Indian aid has doubtless done some good in Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan. Especially relevant are Indian training programmes for legislators, judges, police, diplomats and technicians. India's \$1.7-billion aid for Afghanistan has attracted praise because of its fine targeting, emphasis on capacity-building, and elimination of middlemen.

However, much of India's aid is tied to Indian goods and services. This contrasts with India's own refusal to accept tied aid!

Double standards also prevail in India-Africa economic relations, based on the extraction of oil, gas and minerals. India, like

China, is practising mercantile colonialism in Africa, for which it rightly criticises Western imperialists. India must rethink its Africa relations and aid policy.

Today, neither India nor China presents a model worthy of emulation by poorer countries. India's rapid growth has extracted a high price: ecological destruction and explosive disparities.

India's social sector record is abysmal. The UN Development Programme has just released its Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) estimates, which assess deprivations in education, health, assets and services, besides income.

There are more MPI-poor (421 million) in eight Indian states Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, UP and West Bengal than in the 26 poorest African countries combined.

India can set a worthy example through an equitable, balanced, climate-responsible development model which assures basic needs and dignity for all its people, including food security, safe drinking water, sanitation, healthcare, education and public participation.

India can also put its growing global power to good use by representing underprivileged peoples and nations and demanding reform of today's unequal global order.

Tragically, there's no domestic debate about the purposes of India's power and how India should contribute to making the world a better place.

India will be ultimately judged by the world not on the basis of GDP growth, IT achievements or number of billionaires, but success in combating poverty, creating a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood, and making a better world possible. To do this, its elite must give up its delusions of grandeur. end--

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