

Resolving crime cases and protecting witnesses

Swift, effective action is the need

MUCH as we have been cheered by some momentous judicial moves on significant national issues in recent times, we remain concerned about the overall state of citizens' rights in the country. There are quite a few pointers to such a situation. One of them relates to the disclosure by the chairman of the Human Rights Commission that in 90 per cent of the cases they undertake, the police fail to get any conviction.

The HRC chief only confirms what we have always known --- that the methods the police apply investigation of cases are not only faulty but also often deliberate police efforts to divert the cases from the course that should be followed. And that happens because of the excesses the police commit in handling cases. By and large, a police investigation into criminal cases begins through an abuse of legal procedures by the law enforcers themselves.

Against such a background of legal complications faced by citizens, there comes news that the government is mulling the formulation of a witness protection law as a way of ensuring justice in cases of crime as well as reassuring witnesses that a defence mechanism will be in place for them as security. Such a measure should have been thought of earlier. Even so, it is better late than never.

The story of the elderly woman who has now stopped seeking and expecting justice over the murder of her son in 1997 reveals the risks that witnesses to crime are exposed to in Bangladesh. No witness has ever turned up, for fear of retribution from the killers, to testify in a large number of such cases. There are hundreds of these cases all over the country. Sometimes witnesses are killed. A few have fled abroad. In the process, what happens is fundamentally a travesty of justice: a report points out that as many as 60 per cent of criminal cases remain unresolved owing to the unwillingness of witnesses, owing to fear, to appear in court. Of course, arrest warrants at times compel witnesses to testify, but that does not help them in saving themselves from the wrath of the accused and their accomplices. Observe the figures. Altogether 15,00,000 cases remain pending in court because of an absence of witnesses.

Such realities seriously underscore the need for relevant and effective laws to be in place. Those existing at present do not work chiefly because of police inefficiency or indifference or political pressure exercised on them. Any new law must therefore emphasise greater and absolutely professional performance on the part of the police in handling cases. Let the police be trained in this respect. As for those policemen whose record is bad, let them face disciplinary action. Apart from that, it is hugely important that not only an effective witness protection law be enacted, but measures must also be in place for those who harass or threaten witnesses and the families of victims of crime to be prosecuted in the harshest of ways.

The minister for law has promised action. Let him go into the job swiftly and purposefully.

Monitoring unfit river and road transports

Harsher measures would be necessary against law-breakers

WITH the Muslim community's biggest religious festival the Eid-ul-fitr round the corner, the operators of river vessels and inter-district road transports have started big preparations to catch the home-bound Eid passengers. The owners of the launches, in particular, are reportedly busy repairing many defective vessels so that they may look fit for service. And not to be left behind, the bus owners are also doing similar cosmetic changes on the exterior of the buses to make them look smart and roadworthy.

From past records we know what a moving death trap these smart-looking launches and buses may become. Every year, shocking launch tragedies and road crashes become the stuff of the news in the media, especially during the rainy season and before the big religious festivals.

From the brisk ongoing repair and face-lifting of decrepit and unfit vessels at different dockyards, there is growing fear that this season, too, we may find many of these unfit and old vessels with deceptively fresh look plying the river routes imperilling the lives of hundreds of Eid passengers.

According to reports, more than a hundred such faulty and unfit launches are undergoing face-lifting repairs at the Keraniganj dockyard alone. And we still have no exact figure on how many more such unfit vessels are undergoing so-called repair work at other places all across the country.

Now, how is the government going to prevent these 'repaired' vessels from being pressed into service on the different river routes? Do the authorities have enough manpower to check and verify these vessels? For in the report carried by this newspaper, the DG Shipping has informed that they have only three surveyors and four inspectors to verify the fitness of more than 11,000 registered river vessels. And add to these, another 23,000 unregistered vessels, according to the official's own admission.

A labour organisation, on the other hand, has found that more than two thousand launches out of the 5,000 they had surveyed were without registration.

In the circumstances, the government will be facing a huge challenge in conducting its monitoring and verification work on the river vessels to be released on the waterways during the Eid. And the understaffed shipping department will be required to take especial measures to ensure safety of the millions of passengers rushing to the launch and bus terminals in the capital as elsewhere in the country.

And the shipping minister's, or for that matter, the government's assurances notwithstanding, we would like to caution the authorities that some road and water transport operators will try to run those unfit vehicles all the same. And in that case, the government will have to use very harsh legal measures to restrain the errant transport owners.

Of memory . . . against forgetting

Forgetting is a sin. We will not forget the travesty that was made of our lives by those who caused the murder and mayhem of August-November 1975, who weighed us down with the Fifth Amendment and then with the Seventh Amendment. We will remember because we do not relish the thought of another ambitious soldier commandeering the country and seizing the state through a raw, brazen demonstration of fearsome power resting on the barrel of a gun

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE annulment of the Fifth and Seventh Amendments to the Constitution is a purification of the national soul. No happiness can be greater for a society of decent men and women than an acknowledgement of past villainy and, through that acknowledgement, a wiping out of that villainy from our books, from our hearts, from the deepest recesses of our souls. The pain we have borne for decades, now that it has been lifted by the higher judiciary, is yet something we as a people must remember.

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And we will remember something else as well. Beyond the majors and colonels and brigadiers and generals who kept us hostage to the Fifth and Seventh Amendments, there are all those civilian faces without whose willing cooperation, without whose unadulterated and opportunistic sycophancy none of those soldiers would have had the audacity to overturn the decent, moral republic we fashioned out of the crucible of war in 1971. Those civilians, or politicians if you will, are yet around. Some are dead.

Must we not, at this point in time, reassess the damage they have caused through their cheerful offerings of support to our dictators? Moudud Ahmed tries to interpret our history for us when he informs us that it was the Awami League under Moshtaque that placed the country under martial law in 1975. We are not fooled by such sophistry. But we do remember

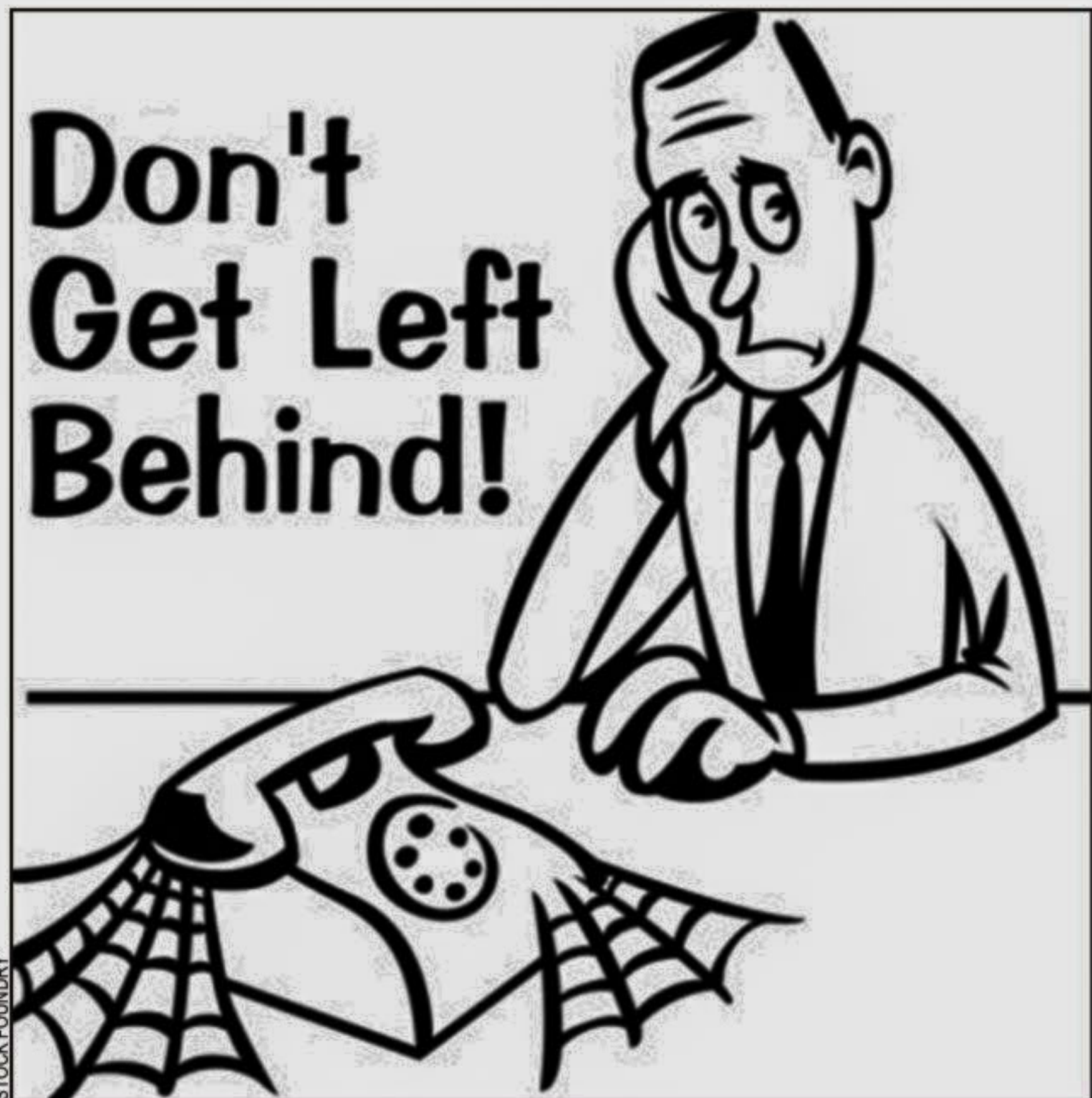
Moudud Ahmed's enormous contributions to the cause of dictatorship. His was a leading voice in both the Zia and the Ershad regimes.

And do not forget the others. Korban Ali of the Awami League and Abdul Halim Chowdhury of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party unabashedly went over to Ershad just as the nation was gearing itself up for a movement against the dictator. In Zia's time, Justice Sattar, Shah Azizur Rahman, Kazi Zafar Ahmed and Enayetullah Khan happily offered their services to the nation's first military ruler. Zafar and Enayetullah later found little that was wrong in associating with Ershad. Anisul Islam Mahmud, originally with Zia's BNP, crossed over one fine morning to become Ershad's foreign minister.

Much a similar act was played out by Humayun Rashid Chowdhury. Retiring from the diplomatic service, he became foreign minister under Ershad. Amazingly, he subsequently joined the Awami League. When he died, he was speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad. Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, the man who organised the historic June 7, 1966 hartal in favour of the Six Points, was roped in by General Ershad as prime minister. He too came back to the Awami League before death came along. Should men like Mizan Chowdhury have been welcomed back to the Awami League? Should the BNP have welcomed Moudud Ahmed back?

The story of the men and women who let us all down in the era of dictatorship goes on and on. Ataur Rahman Khan had no regrets being Ershad's powerless prime minister. The regrets came after he had been shown the door. Mashiur Rahman Jadu Mia helped Zia fashion his political party. His son Shafiqul Gani Swapan helped Ershad do a similar feat. Justice B.A. Siddiky took charge of the Muslim League after Khan Abdus Sabur's demise. He ended up deserting the party to take up the job of permanent representative to the United Nations in Ershadian times.

His party colleagues Salahuddin Quader



Join the government party!

Chowdhury and Syeda Razia Faiz landed ministerial jobs in the regime. Anwar Zahid had no qualms about joining Ershad and then ditching him. Remember the jovial Shamsul Huda Chowdhury? His last assignment was speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad "elected" in the farcical elections of 1988. Fakhru Islam Munshi, now in the Awami League, was a minister of state under Ershad. Sheikh Shahidul Islam deserted his progressive background to obtain a berth in Ershad's cabinet. Anwar Hossain Manju made his way from his newspaper to the Ershad cabinet. Both men lead a faction of the Jatiyo Party today.

Shah Moazzam Hossain, once in the Awami League, became a loud voice of the Jatiyo Party in the Ershad years, hurling obscenities at Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina all the way. He was happily welcomed into the BNP by Begum Zia a few years ago. K.M. Obaidur Rahman came home to free Bangladesh with the Mujibnagar government-in-exile in December 1971. He then made a career change through joining General Zia's regime.

There are others. General Osmany bravely resigned from Parliament when the

Fourth Amendment was passed in January 1975. Seven months later, he saw nothing wrong with being Khondokar Moshtaque's defence advisor. Air Vice Marshal A.K. Khondokar served, under Zia, in diplomatic assignments abroad before taking charge as planning minister under Ershad. Today, he is planning minister in Sheikh Hasina's cabinet.

General Shafiqullah was ambassador and high commissioner abroad in the Zia and Ershad days before becoming an Awami League Member of Parliament in 1996. A.R.S. Doha, an Awami Leaguer, went to prison in erstwhile West Pakistan during Yahya Khan's time. In Zia's days, he was ambassador to Iran. In Ershad's, he was a minister. Justice Nurul Islam served Ershad as vice president. The bureaucrat-poet A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan served Ershad as ambassador to Washington and minister for agriculture.

The struggle of man against power, Milan Kundera informs us, is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

We have not forgotten.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

The trend in world population



Good demographic data is critical for planning schools, health systems, and public transportation, for designing policies based on future population projections, for monitoring the effectiveness of service delivery, and much more.

HARUN UR RASHID

WITH 267 people being born every minute and 108 dying, the world's population will top 7 billion next year, according to Population Reference Bureau, a research group based in Washington.

The study of the research group found the following trend:

- Over 80 million will be added to developing countries each year;
- Over 20 million will be added to poorest developing countries each year;
- By 2050 the world's population will be about 9 billion;
- The birth rate will continue to decline in developed countries;
- By 2050 Russia and Japan will be deleted from the list of 10 most populous countries and will be replaced by Congo and Ethiopia.

The population of Africa is projected to at least double by mid-century to 2.1 billion, and Asia will add an additional 1.3 billion. Bangladesh will have a population of 200 million by 2020.

While the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand will continue to grow, population will shrink in most European countries, Russia, Japan and South Korea. According to another report, in the next 30 years the labour force in Germany will shrink from 41 million to 21 million, and from 23 million to 11 million in Italy.

According to the European Commission, the percentage of Europeans older than 65 will nearly double by 2050. In the 1950s there were seven workers for every retiree in advanced economies, and by 2050 the ratio in the European Union will drop to 1.3 to 1.

Figures as reported in the media show

that gross public social expenditure in the European Union has increased from 16% in 1980 to 21% in 2005, compared with 15.9% in the US.

In France, the figure is 31%, with state pensions making up more than 44% of the total and health care making up 30%, the highest in Europe.

In Sweden and Switzerland, 7 of 10 people work past 50, in France, only half do. The legal retirement age in France is 60, while Germany recently raised it to 67 for those born after 1963 (below 50 years).

Eurostat, the statistical arm of the European Union, reported that deaths will outpace births in five years, a trend that has already occurred in Bulgaria, Latvia and Hungary.

World Population Day, observed on July 11, seeks to raise awareness of global population issues. The theme of this year's World Population Day was "Everyone counts."

To be counted is to become visible. Censuses and population data play a critical role in development and humanitarian response and recovery. Reliable data makes a difference, and the key is to collect, analyse and disseminate data in a way that drives good decision making. The numbers that emerge from data collection can illuminate important trends.

This is especially important for women and young people. Data that is sorted by gender and age can foster increased responsiveness by national decision-makers to the rights and needs of women and youth and help build a more equitable and prosperous society.

Good demographic data is critical for planning schools, health systems, and public transportation, for designing policies based on future population projections, for monitoring the effectiveness of service delivery, and much more.

With quality data governments can track the trend better and make greater progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and promoting and protecting the dignity and human rights of all the people. It is reported that Bangladesh's next census will begin in March next year.

The population pressure in the developing countries will have adverse effect on:

- Prices of food;
- Availability of fresh water,
- Reduction of poverty;
- Availability of energy;
- Environment.

As the population rises in South Asia, regional cooperation is imperative for addressing water management, effects of global climate change, energy, and food security.

To check the rise of population, Bangladesh needs to bolster family planning programmes through measures such as reduction of poverty, maternal care before and after child birth, easy access to family planning clinics in villages and education and motivation of male partners. Furthermore, the imams of the mosques must be employed to advocate the necessity of family planning and assert that family planning is not against Islamic precepts.

The declining rate of population in advanced economies may attract the skilled youth of Bangladesh to industrialised countries. The need for coordination and cooperation between the government and the private sector is imperative for making them skilled through establishment of technical institutes at the upazila level. Hopefully, all stakeholders will play their parts with regard to utilisation of rising population in Bangladesh.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.