

Death under a speeding train

Irresponsibility on all sides

It will be an understatement to say that we are shocked by the tragedy that has taken place in Sayedabad, Sirajganj. No tragedy can be greater than the sudden death of people in circumstances previously unforeseen. And such tragedy takes on a bigger dimension when one realises that it could have been prevented. In the present case, it boggles the mind why a crowd at a public rally should spill over on to the railway tracks, oblivious of the dangers involved.

As far as we understand it, the tragedy is a clear demonstration of irresponsibility on the part of everyone involved. Consider the role of BNP leaders who organised the meeting, including Begum Khaleda Zia, as the chairperson of the BNP. It should have been their task to ensure that party volunteers were present to dissuade the crowd from converging on the railway tracks as a measure of security. The fundamental requirement for politicians is ensuring that lives are safe. In this particular instance, that requirement was conspicuous by its absence. We might add here that the leader of the opposition, once the train was set afire, should have seen to it that the flames were doused through allowing the fire brigade to approach the train and through exhorting her own party followers to assist in the task. It grieves us to know that this sense of responsibility too was cast aside.

Then there is the role of the railway authority. Reports suggest that the train had a delayed start at Dinajpur. That is quite possible, given that rail services in Bangladesh have generally been unable to stick to their schedules. The bigger question here, though, is whether the people at the Jamtoli station sent out information to Sayedabad about the approaching train so that precautionary measures could be taken to slow it down given the presence of the crowd on the tracks. There are, naturally, standard regulations that are followed by the railways. One wonders if those regulations were adhered to where this particular train movement was concerned.

Finally, there is the plain and simple question for the police and the district authorities: what measures did they take to ensure discipline among the crowds at the rally? A police officer has sought to explain the tragedy away by suggesting that if the police had not permitted the rally at that particular spot, the government would have been accused of repressing the opposition. That is an absurd thought, considering that it is the responsibility of the police, no matter how adverse the circumstances, to ensure security for all. They should have been firm about not allowing the rally to be held so close to the railway tracks or at least ensuring that the railway track was kept clear at all times by placing guards on either side of the railway track nearest to the meeting venue. Why did they not go for action when people began to converge all over the tracks? And where were they when the mob prevented the fire brigade from approaching the torched train?

On the part of the government, we think, the communication minister should not have gone on the blaming offensive, when he himself has requested the home ministry for a thorough inquiry.

All sides should stop the blame game and try to get to the truth and prevent such incidents from recurring.

We offer our sincere condolences to the families of the dead and injured. Let such tragedy not recur, not ever again.

Hazardous ship-breaking

HC directives must be complied with

It is a double edged culpability being perpetrated with impunity. In the first place, ship-breaking yards have been operating without having obtained environment clearance certificate (ECC) from the Directorate of Environment (DOE). This has been going on despite an earlier HC directive to the government not to allow such uncertified yards to run.

We are aware of ship-breaking yards doing business without formal registration so that it has been difficult to bring them within the fold of discipline. They have carried the two-some stigma in terms of use of child labour in extremely hazardous conditions, sometimes causing fatalities. Basically, they are guilty of breaking contaminated ships as scraps much to the peril of the environment around.

Now, a High Court bench on Monday, in response to a petition filed by Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) has issued some fresh directives to the government. It has asked the authorities not to issue any no objection certificate (NOC) for importing scrap ships into the country without environmental clearance and decontamination certificate issued at source. Actually it has directed the government to ensure submission of proper decontamination certificates in accordance with Basel Convention which treats old ships themselves as hazardous wastes. That is because they come with built-in toxic substances. Cleaning ships is a difficult exercise involving huge cost. So the insistence on the importers to procure decontamination certificates from the exporting party is so very relevant. It is only on satisfaction of such documentation will the environment authority allow any scrap ship into our territory and not before that.

In fact, the Supreme Court's directive of August 22nd to Bangladesh Ship Breakers Association (BSBA) was quite specific on the subject: it asked BSBA 'to execute the HC order to get all scrap ships decontaminated at source and outside Bangladesh territory'.

Whatever maybe the industrial demand for scrap iron, there are ways to meet our requirement by following the best practice method as is done in other neighbouring countries. Why should be allow our yards to be a dumping ground.



STAR

Rail tracks, the BNP and Spain

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party must change, in more ways than one. Now that two notorious amendments to the constitution are finally in shreds, it must do what those Francoists did in Spain. It must reform, enough to convince the country it can provide positive leadership to it.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There are all sorts of bizarre things happening in our ageing world. And our world is, of course, the unfortunate, battered country we happen to inhabit. Observe. The BNP would have us know that its student wing had applied for permission to hold its rally at Ullapara of Sirajganj but then had to shift its premises because the ruling Awami League too planned its own meeting there.

If the Awami League was very well aware of the planned rally by the Jatiyotabadi Chhatra Dal, why did it not move its own rally to some other venue? This question is now academic, of course, for tragedy is already upon us. A speeding train has mown down a crowd, killing at least five persons and leaving many others badly injured. The train itself has been torched. Politics, if you must now, has taken a turn for the worse.

Whatever will happen next? We lurch from one uncertainty to the next, from one tragedy to the next appalling tragedy. We were outraged by the sight of all those Awami League goons beating a BNP man to death a few days ago. Today, we might

as well condemn all those men who put the lives of so many individuals in danger by having them crowd the railway tracks in Sirajganj. And we condemn those who set the train afire, putting the lives of its passengers at risk. You call this politics? Politics is a good deal more than that. There is the sublime about it. Nothing was sublime in or about Sirajganj.

One would have thought Khaleda Zia, as a former prime minister, as leader of the opposition, as the widow of the man her supporters respect beyond measure, would be as shocked as we are by what her followers caused on those rail tracks. That she did not hint at the slightest bit of shock in her, that indeed she thinks it was all part of a ruling party conspiracy to have that train ram into that mob to weaken the opposition makes you wonder which way the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is going.

It is going the wrong way. It has refused to go into soul-searching over its defeat at the last elections. When a whole nation condemns the thievery its leading lights indulged in --- and that was in their glory days --- it continues to regard these people as symbols of its future, and also ours. A pity.

When the former prime minister feels unhappy about the upcoming war crimes trial of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army, you are inclined to ask why she must take it upon herself to defend those who caused so much misery for us back when we were struggling to free ourselves of Pakistan. Doesn't she and doesn't the BNP remember the three million Bengalis who died in 1971? Don't they recall the images of the putrefying corpses of Bengali intellectuals, all murdered by the goon squads of the Jamaat-e-Islami, in Rayerbazar?

That the BNP has in a large way been a platform for a good number of anti-Liberation elements to rehabilitate themselves has never been in question. That the founder of the party saw nothing wrong in tampering with the constitution and that he was happy to have the killers of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders strut around as heroes rather than as the despicable criminals they were is a truth no one, not even the "Bangladeshi nationalists," will deny. And yet there are the lessons of history the BNP could have gone through.

In Spain, following the demise of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, his followers were brave enough to understand the need for reforms among themselves. They banded together, embraced the democratic process that took shape in the aftermath of Franco's death and went on to contribute to a strengthening of Spanish pluralism.

The BNP ought to have done a similar thing long ago. By continuing to be arrogantly proud of its past, by going disconsolate every time it has lost an election, it

has shown itself incapable of coming to terms with the future.

Begum Zia has just exhorted us to be ready to lay down our lives. Whatever for? Simple. To get the government we elected less than two years ago out of power and so out of her way. She has reminded the country of her struggle against General Ershad, the obvious point being to prepare them for a similar movement against Sheikh Hasina.

It is bad politics. And here are the reasons. First, the former prime minister carefully stops short of informing people that not long ago it was Ershad she forged an alliance with to keep the Awami League out of power. Selective politics is bad for a party, terrible for its leaders. You heap the old abuse on Ershad but you seal your lips when it comes to the camaraderie you enjoyed with him.

And now for the second reason: mixing up the Ershad dictatorship with Sheikh Hasina's elected government is as good as misconstruing the entire purpose of politics. Worse, it is a clear sign of how a party, inconsolably unhappy at being in the opposition, can in its desperation push a nation into dangerous, uncharted territory.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party must change, in more ways than one. Now that two notorious amendments to the constitution are finally in shreds, it must do what those Francoists did in Spain. It must reform, enough to convince the country it can provide positive leadership to it.

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Revisiting Nato's role

Whatever future strategy Nato formulates, it has to convince the public in member states that its role is relevant during the 21st century, and that it will not act as a war machine in distant lands where its soldiers are killed.

HARUN UR RASHID

It is very important to remember that its 1949 founding documents clearly say that Nato is a defensive organisation, which would go into action only when one of its member states was attacked. This is known as collective defence. Nato (Atlantic Pact) was constituted to counter communism and the Soviet threat during the Cold War.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, Nato lost its raison d'être given that Western Europe and the United States were no longer threatened by an invasion from Eastern Europe. Nato thus had the choice between disbanding itself or developing a new reason for its existence.

Many strategists say this gave the opportunity to the United States to reshape Nato in ways that would serve its global interests. The first step in the US strategy of changing the nature of Nato was the attack on Yugoslavia to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo under the doctrine of humanitarian intervention (currently rephrased as "responsibility to protect"). Yugoslavia did not expect an attack from Nato because it did not attack its member state.

At the Nato 50th Anniversary Celebrations in Washington in April 1999, one of the aims of the United States was to present to the European states the attack

on Yugoslavia as an example of the future role of Nato as an "offensive" organisation whose aim was to act as the world's policeman.

The birth of the new Nato was sanctioned by the following words of the 19 heads of state and government on April 24, 1999:

"This new alliance will be bigger, more capable and more flexible, involved in collective defence and capable of undertaking new missions, among which is the active commitment in the management of crises, including the operations of responding to crises" (Washington Summit Communiqué, 24/4/1999).

In other words, Nato is intended to project its military force beyond its borders not only in Europe, but also in other regions, like the Middle East, Africa and the Indian Ocean. Nato gives itself the right to intervene anywhere in the world whenever it feels its interests are threatened, without consulting the United Nations.

Then came 9/11 and Afghanistan was attacked by the US to topple the Taliban regime, which harboured Al-Qaeda leaders. Nato troops led by the US are involved in Afghanistan to stabilise the country against the threat of Taliban.

The war has been going on in Afghanistan for nine years. Nato soldiers are being killed almost every day, and

during the last eight months of 2010, 490 Nato soldiers were killed including 323 US soldiers in Afghanistan. In August 2010, the Dutch troops left Afghanistan. Britain reportedly wishes to withdraw its troops by 2012 and other European Nato nations, including Germany, are reluctant to stay the course in Afghanistan because of the public's anger over involvement in the war in Afghanistan, which does not seem to be ending.

After almost a decade of war and tens of billions in international aid, the international risk management firm Maplecroft put together a food security index -- using 12 criteria developed with the United Nations' World Food Program -- to evaluate the threat to supplies of basic food staples in 163 countries. Afghanistan ranked dead last and was the only non-African nation among the 10 most food-insecure countries on the planet.

The United Nations ranks countries via a Human Development Index, which includes such indicators of wellbeing as life expectancy, educational attainment, and income. In 2009, when the U.N. issued a new Human Development Report, Afghanistan was in worse shape than before, ranking number 181 of 182 nations, higher than only Niger.

It seems that following the failure of Nato to defeat Afghan insurgents, it will be reluctant to go in for a war in a distant country.

The question is: What is the future strategy of Nato for the 21st century?

Nato consists of 28 member states as of today. Collective defence has been the principal reason for many East European countries becoming Nato members since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Other European countries also strive for its membership for the same reason.

Whatever future strategy Nato formulates, it has to convince the public in member states that its role is relevant during the 21st century, and that it will not act as a war machine in distant lands where its soldiers are killed.

The new draft of the Nato Strategic Concept was presented by former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright in May this year. While the report acknowledges the limits and responsibility of the bloc it proposes to substantially expand its spheres of activity, including missile defence, energy security, cyber crime, terrorism, piracy and ecology.

One important dimension of future strategy of Nato is how to engage Russia in Nato's new role in meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Russia has been closely watching the enlarged role of Nato and does not seem to be happy with it. To Russia, Nato is duplicating the role of the UN and it opposes Nato's role as a world policeman. Secondly, Russia believes that Nato has long ago exhausted the limits of its natural enlargement with the current 28 member-states. Thirdly, Russia is concerned about Nato's encirclement. Fourthly, Russia fears that Nato may cause crises in the Third World by its aggressive policy instead of containing external threats in Europe.

In the light of the above, strategists believe that if Nato wants to be relevant in the 21st century, Nato-Russia relations need to improve substantially and both sides must take into account any historical sensitivities in bridging differences. That seems to be the only way to move ahead for peace and security in the world.

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