

# Improving domestic situation as important as fighting Taliban

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FOR the last several years Bangladesh has been the top contributor to the UN peacekeeping force. Its forces have served for UN in various continents and have earned due recognition for their contribution. But one assignment which Bangladeshi troops never expected was the fighting against Taliban in Afghanistan.

The government says that the US did not make any formal request for contribution of the troops. However, it does agree that in the meeting that took place between Foreign Minister Dipu Moni and the US special envoy for the Af-Pak, Richard Holbrooke, in New York on September 26, Bangladeshi cooperation was sought in development of Afghanistan. Whatever may be the truth, it was only desirable that the country took a wise decision and said no to such a request.

There is no doubt that Taliban in Afghanistan, and now also in Pakistan in the form of Taharique-Taliban, needs to be mainstreamed and controlled. It is equally true that in nearly a decade the western forces under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Nato

have not been very successful. Often, they have also been blamed for causing collateral damage resulting in killing of civilians, which has caused further alienation of the people. Thus, a search for the right approach has continued.

The US has been looking for involvement of some Muslim majority countries in its operation in Afghanistan. In the ISAF, barring Turkey, no other Muslim country is involved. Though Pakistan is also engaged in action against extremists in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and other bordering areas, it is fighting the battle mostly inside its own territory.

Moreover, the commitment of Pakistan to the battle against Taliban has always been in doubt. A certain dilemma was seen in its approach as the country had earlier used these extremists as tools against India. An influential section in the country wants to keep Taliban that way so that it could be used for similar purposes in the post-US withdrawal Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Bangladesh, under the Sheikh Hasina government, set a very different example. It has been taking all steps against extremists inside the country. The law enforcement agencies of Bangladesh have been acting against groups like the Jama'at ul Mujahideen

Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B). Local chapters of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM) have also been busted.

This has not only prevented terror attacks inside Bangladesh, but has also weakened their network and infrastructure in the country. The government action last year prevented LeT and Jaish modules from carrying out terror acts against India and the US embassy in Dhaka on the anniversary of 26/11.

Bangladesh government has also acted against Indian insurgent groups. Its actions have given deadly blow to terror outfits like United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Now, thanks to the action of Bangladesh government, all top leaders of Ulfa, barring Paresh Barua who is in Myanmar, are behind bars in India. This has also generated tremendous goodwill for government of Bangladesh in India. In fact, this has removed a critical hurdle, which had in the past vitiated Indo-Bangladesh relations.

It is hardly surprising that seeing the commitment of Bangladesh to act against extremism and terrorism, the US looked towards it hoping to get some support in its endeavour in Afghanistan. The need was also felt as some other contributing countries are planning their withdrawal, while the Dutch have already done so.

Bangladesh, however, took a wise decision by not acceding to the US request. The contribution of forces by

Bangladesh to the US led operation against Taliban in Afghanistan would have created difficulty for the country. It would have not only prompted Taliban and their affiliated organisations to create trouble in Bangladesh it would have also weakened a popular government.

Bangladesh has only recently managed to control extremist elements with great effort. Bangladeshi involvement in Afghanistan would have put into disarray all the good work. It was definitely not desirable for it to get into this kind of act.

Taliban, Al Qaeda and the extremist ideology they represent definitely need to be marginalised. For this, if action in Pakistan and Afghanistan is necessary, it is equally important to control their affiliates in other countries. Countries like Bangladesh, which has traditionally enjoyed the image of a moderate Islamic country, have also faced problems because of them.

The involvement of Bangladesh in Afghanistan would have created difficulty for the present government at home, and any resultant chaos would have only given space to the extremist forces who are presently under pressure in the country. Bangladesh is presently making an equally important effort at home to weaken affiliates of al-Qaeda and Taliban ideology, which is no less important than making contribution to ISAF.

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## Untold story behind the CNG plight



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AHMED BAKR

DHAKA is dying. Most people would disagree with this statement -- the city seems to be

growing every day, inching itself onto Ashulia and Savar. Old timers on the other hand would agree and say that the beautiful city they once called home is turning into an urban disaster.

However, the reason why I say that Dhaka is terminally ill is because a city with a failed traffic system cannot be expected to live for long -- and Dhaka's traffic system is facing all sorts of tribulations. While we can go on and on about the traffic congestion resulting from the lack of roads, the inability to uphold basic traffic laws and the ever increasing number of cars on the streets, my point of discussion today is somewhat different. A large number of people in Dhaka city rely on CNG powered taxis, and the almost daily pains taken by these people screams for a reform.

For the past two years, the fare for travelling by CNG powered taxis, or more simply CNGs as we commonly refer to them, has skyrocketed. On the passengers' front, sheer outrage has, with time, mellowed down to resentment and bitter acceptance towards CNG drivers.

For the greater part of time passengers are unable to convince a CNG driver to take them to their desired location. In the event that they manage to convince the driver, the requested fare is absurdly high, at times double the appropriate amount. While most of us blame the drivers, labeling them as greedy, inconsiderate exploiters of the poor man, we tend to overlook the reasons behind their behaviour.

While the knowledge is spreading, it is still not fully known by the masses that CNG drivers have to pay abnor-

mally high rents for their vehicles. The government has fixed the rent for CNG vehicles at Tk.450. A CNG vehicle owner is entitled to only Tk.450 for renting out a CNG vehicle for a day. Violating this regulation, owners charge anywhere from Tk.550 to Tk.800 per day as rent. This translates into drivers charging higher fares, with the final burden falling on the shoulders of the everyday CNG users.

My personal, informal interviews with at least three dozen CNG drivers have led to the following statistics. On average, a CNG driver can make around fifteen trips a day in the heart of Dhaka city, under prevailing traffic conditions. They make an average income of about Tk.1500 or less, of which they pay half as rent, and a further Tk.300 as daily expenses on food and fuel. This leaves them with a net income of about Tk.500 per day. This is obviously due to the fact that they inflate the fare. If they abide by the meter, their net income is very low, and sometimes even in the negative.

The statistics mentioned above do not take into account the expenses of repairing a CNG driven auto rickshaw, the payment of which comes straight from the driver's pocket. Neither does it take into account that there are days when the vehicle might be unusable for the day, due to purposes of repair. The rent is not excused on such days and the driver is left in debt.

CNG owners on the other hand feel that the rent that they charge is per-

fectly justifiable. Tk.450 is just too low a rent is the shared sentiment. With most CNG owners owning around four vehicles on average, the regulated rent would yield a monthly income of Tk.54,000. Considering that they do not face maintenance charges, one would think that it is a reasonable return. Under the current circumstances, however, they can expect to have an income of Tk.90,000 with a rent of Tk.750.

What is certain is that the system needs to be reformed. A possible approach would be a calculated revision of the rent of the CNG vehicles and the fare for CNG driven vehicles. However, the rates would eventually have to be revised due to shifting macroeconomic forces such as inflation.

A better solution would probably be to allocate a percentage of everyday earnings between the owners and the drivers. It must be mentioned here that the CNG drivers should receive the greater share. This would provide greater incentive for them to undertake as many trips as possible, sparing commuters the hassle they face in trying to convince the drivers.

However, the CNG vehicle meters must be recalibrated so as to allow for acceptable levels of profits for both CNG drivers and owners. However, it cannot be stressed enough that the government needs to reform the entire public transport system. Affordable and accessible transport is vital for the

healthy growth of a city, and Dhaka's public transport system has much room for improvement.

What is most important, however, is that such a system be effectively implemented and enforced. Proper monitoring and policing is mandatory. Drivers must have the right and available opportunity to report against their owners if they find a violation of the regulations. In order to keep the drivers in check, passengers must also have an easy means of complaining against individual drivers, say for example reporting the license plate number by simply texting it, or by online reporting (for more tech savvy customers, say university students).

In the end, it's the passengers who have it hardest. And while we curse the drivers of CNG driven taxis, we never realise that the root of the injustice is actually the owner. It's a sad truth about our nation that the guilty run scot-free while the poor and unprotected are handed out punishments and penalties.

The situation that we face today is just another example of the failure of purely capitalist ideals. Businesses driven by strong profit motives in a system of poor governance, in a society with low levels of education and a weak sense of social responsibility, will inevitably result in injustice. It is our responsibility that we change that system and not merely become a part of it.

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## Rhyme of a relentless fighter

MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

FOR nearly seven decades he traveled through the throbbing corridors of thrilling times. Most of his life coincided with the last six decades of the 20th century. He was a child in the formidable forties and young man in the swirling sixties of the last century.

Ataur Rahman Khan, popularly known as Kaiser, described himself as a fighter who never tired of struggles. Politician with a difference, distinguished diplomat, dedicated social worker and generous friend, Kaiser was the epitome of our challenging times. Even as he breathed his last at the age of 70 in a hospital in his hometown Chittagong on the October 9, he symbolised the unflinching spirit of an undaunted fighter.

A few days before leaving Dhaka, recovering from the wounds received in a road accident, he smilingly said (mutual friend Tofail Sami reported): "Let me die in Chittagong." That was typical Kaiser: courage, determination, tenacity and sparkling humour rolled into one. A brave warrior he stood tall and unbending in life and in the face of death.

Years before his sad demise he was elevated to member of the Presidium of the Awami League. He had joined the party as a young man in the late '60s when

the organisation became the platform of Bengali nationalism and self-assertion under the epoch-making leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Kaiser entered the tumultuous arena of national politics after a period of initiation in student politics during the stormy years of early '60s. That was the unforgettable time when we met as freshers in the Dhaka University. We were admitted into the department of political science in 1959. Time fails to erase the enduring memory of the first encounter. He was a tall and impressive young man dressed smartly in spotless white shirt and trousers. We became friends for life after that first meeting in the legendary "Madhu's canteen."

For us, more so for Kaiser, the beginning foreshadowed later developments. The early '60s were not only a swinging time when existentialism and rock music cascaded down the flowing stream of life. It was something more. It was also struggling Vietnam, fighting American aggression, and Bengalees in erstwhile Pakistan resisting the then West Pakistan-centric military and autocratic rule.

As a prominent and spirited student leader Kaiser played a significant role in that resistance. That initiation led him, after the end of his student career, to join the struggle for Bengali self-assertion and emancipation in the late '60s.

Subsequently, he participated in the War of Liberation.

Kaiser actively participated not only in student politics but in the entire range of cultural, literary and recreational exercises which were part and parcel of university life. He and I belonged to the same student organisation, the now defunct "Student Force," and played the role of leading activists in student politics through that institution.

From 1961 it shared in spearheading the Dhaka university-centric movement against the autocratic order imposed by the Pakistani military dictator Ayub Khan. Kaiser, I and other active members of the "Student Force" also participated with other student organisations, including Students League and Students Union, in the successful movement for rejecting the unreasonable recommendations of the Education Commission in 1962.

Kaiser began his political life as a loyal and committed member of the Awami League. From the twilight of the '60s he took active part in the party's historic struggle for Bengali emancipation culminating in the glorious victory in the War of Liberation in 1971.

As a competent inheritor of the family tradition of public service, Ataur Rahman Khan Kaiser contributed his best to politics, social service, national and regional development and welfare. Despite con-

stant involvement in demanding political and social activities Kaiser and his wife Nilufar together built up a happy home and family life. As loving father and mother they reared up three daughters, Wasika, Humayra and Munija, with unfailing care and loving attention.

Enlightened political endeavours formed the stuff and essence of Kaiser's life. But in the social spheres he moved beyond and above politics. His mission was quintessentially human. He saw politics as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Pursuing politics of vintage he sought to sustain human values of love, understanding and fellowship. He symbolised the modest and quiet resistance against the politics of violence and confrontation.

The spirited and vibrant atmosphere of the Dhaka University in the '60s permeated his entire being. Along with his contemporaries, class fellows and friends he acquired enduring and enlivening ideas and knowledge of global import. This made him and the entire generation of which he was a member virtual citizens of the world without severing the roots of profound national consciousness.

In their minds Viddya Sagar, Michael Madhusadhan Dutta, Rabindranath Thakur, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Jibananda Das easily coexisted with Shelly, Keats, Byron, Jean Paul Sartre,

Albair Camus and Jack Keruak. The blend was at once majestic and joyful.

All this made Kaiser more than a run of the mill politician. He was a cultured man. The awareness of those noble ideas and thoughts helped him break the barriers of race, religion and language. One remembers in fond memory a youthful Kaiser walking cheerfully with friends under a moonlit sky in the streets of Ramna during autumn, singing Manabendra's "Bane noy mone mone pakhi aj gan gai," or the lilting song of Mukesh "Suhana safar aur yea mausum hasin" enthraling the deserted roads.

He was in the heart of his hearts a poet. Several of his touching poems found place in our collection of poems "Mukhar Arayanna" (Eloquent Wilderness) published in the 1980s. Poets, as the romantic PB. Shelly asserted, "Are unacknowledged legislators to the world." Poets move human minds. So do successful and farsighted political leaders: they change human societies and life by working on minds. There was, thus, no contradiction in Kaiser's politics and poetry.

Now that he has departed and there is no chance of meeting him again this side of Eternity, one can only remember him in poetic terms:

"Accurrent under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell



Ataur Rahman Khan Kaiser

He passed the stage of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.  
Gentle or Jew  
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once tall and handsome as you."

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