

The lengthening shadows of stalking

No alternative to tough handling of such crimes

THE murder of a mother in Madhukhali upazila of Faridpur for protesting the stalking of her twin daughters is once more a sign of the menace of sexual harassment of young women taking on uglier colours. Worse, it is a powerful indication of how our law enforcers have been failing consistently and embarrassingly, to take action against those who have been committing such nefarious deeds. Only the other day, the prime minister spoke of tougher laws being enacted to deal with these culprits. She reassured the nation that no one caught stalking women would be spared. Our question, which is also that of society as a whole, is pretty simple: do we need newer laws to handle such criminality or do we need some effective, deterrent action on the ground to see to it that the menace is put to an end? The statistics, as a report by Ain-o-Salish Kendra makes clear, inform us that despite the growing public condemnation of stalking, incidents of such manifest criminality have steadily gone up. And they have gone up because of the gross failure of the authorities to bring to justice those who have been indulging in the crime.

Only a few days ago, college teacher Mizanur Rashid succumbed to his injuries, caused by a motor cycle rider because he had protested the harassment of young women in Natore. Now this new death in Madhukhali, again at the hands of a motor cycle rider, gives us an insight into the no-holds-barred method the stalkers appear to have adopted for unleashing their vengeance.

Let there be no doubt that the patent failure of the law enforcers to act against stalkers has now led us all to this sordid pass. The figures speak for themselves. In recent times, as many as 25 women have taken their lives to put themselves out of the misery engendered by stalking. Nine men brave and conscientious enough to have protested the stalking of women have been killed. A father, unable to withstand the humiliation heaped on his family by the stalking of his young daughter, simply committed suicide. All these incidents ought to have been eye-openers for the authorities. Unfortunately, there has hardly been any instance of a stalker being caught and brought to justice. The consequences can only be horrendous. In the cities, small towns and villages of Bangladesh, young women will remain in a state of vulnerability unless the state begins to demonstrate its will and ability to punish those elements who have already committed the crime of stalking.

The Madhukhali murder must spur the police into action, in two ways. First, the killer must be swiftly apprehended. A similar approach must be made in dealing with earlier incidents of stalking. Second, the police must develop the mechanism and the tactics that will allow them to take preventive action, that is, they must act against stalkers before tragedy strikes. Law enforcement is a twenty-four-hour job. Let us see that job performed to the nation's satisfaction.

Toppled building and Rajuk's role

It speaks of our whole governance system

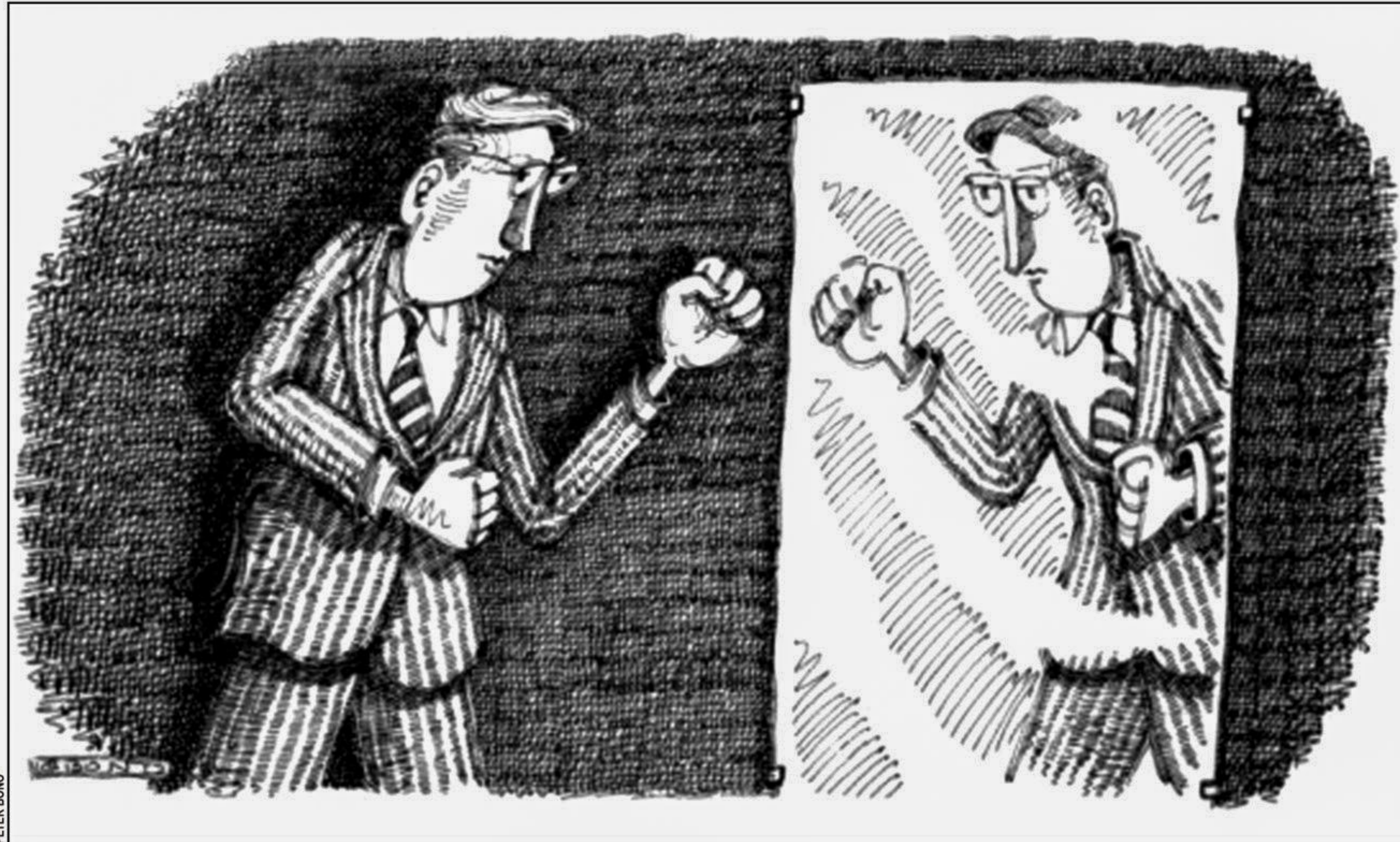
BUILDINGS are supposed to last for generations. Some of ours fall before they are finished. The latest such incident occurred in Dhakkin Khan area of our city where a three-storied apartment complex just fell on its side as a toy house used by children. Thankfully, there were no deaths, even in the neighbouring house on top of which the building fell. The photograph speaks volumes about the fragility of the structure and clearly shows, even to the untrained eye, that the foundation was far too weak for it to support the so-called apartment building. Most basic norms of construction were not followed. The question arises as to how could any one start building a structure based on such an ill-conceived design in the first place? Is there no monitoring body that keeps tab on construction in the city areas? Can anybody just build any structure, however flawed, anywhere at any time. This speaks volumes about our whole system of governance -- how building permission is given, who are qualified to raise a structure, under what soil conditions and with what safeguards -- there is no way of knowing whether any authority has satisfied itself that the concerns have been at all met before laying of the first brick.

If we are not mistaken, the truth is that most owners of plots do not bother to take either the Rajuk's permission or employ any legitimate professional firm or qualified engineers or architects for their construction job. Most likely they do their own construction using the services of unqualified people. For rudimentary construction in the rural areas such methods may still be permissible. But such a practice for construction work in the capital city of our country is utterly impermissible.

Only recently we had several incidents of building tilting to one side precariously. Who knows how many faulty buildings are already in use which will collapse at the slightest of a tremor. But perhaps the biggest shame is that last June 25 people died in a building collapse in Begunbari area of the city, to the best of our knowledge.

Hence the governance issue. We have specified authorities, specific laws and well established professional bodies. But we do not have implementation of the laws and also legal remedy for those who violate them.

Rajuk needs to immediately set up mobile teams of civil engineers, architects, soil scientists and other relevant experts and start visiting low lying areas and flood plains where buildings have been constructed and are in the process of being erected. Such a team should also be accompanied by a magistrate who can pass legally binding orders on the spot to either stop construction and vacate premises or punish the owners who are the main villains of the scheme. There will have to be several such teams and they should immediately start their work before more lives are lost due to the recklessness of some greedy land owners.



Us versus ourselves.

A day of insanity

It was not one religion against another. It was not one nation against another. It was not one language against another. It was instead the very grain of this nation pitted against its grain. This nation was divided into two halves, each half sworn to eliminate the other.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

TWO week ago it was World Hand Washing Day. We have got Victory Day, Independence Day, Valentine's Day and many more national and international days. Why not observe one more, the National Depravity Day on October 28? Every now and then it will remind us that not so long ago this country was reeling on the brink of madness.

It still does. But we had lost it on that day, may be we had gone around the bend already to precipitate that madness in our actions of that day. This country has gone through political upheavals. We have fought a liberation war when three million lives were lost. We have had our share of insanity, but this one was different. On October 28, 2006, we had a chastening glimpse of how a nation could ruthlessly turn against itself.

It was a day of civil strife, but it was also the sliver of time when, if I take the liberty of playing an amateur historian,

this country for the first time in history experienced the horror of a civil war. It was not one religion against another. It was not one nation against another. It was not one language against another. It was instead the very grain of this nation pitted against its grain. This nation was divided into two halves, each half sworn to eliminate the other.

I propose this day should be marked with special significance. Flags should be kept half-mast. We should wear black badges. It should be a national holiday, a day of remembrance, not a day of mourning. There should be workshops, seminars, talk shows, discussions and speeches. All the amusement parks and recreation centres should be closed and celebrations banned for that day. People should stay home and talk amongst themselves.

American poet Edgar Allen Poe said about his own insanity: "I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity." October 28, 2006, was a day of insanity. It happened 35 years after we achieved independence. It happened

only four years ago from last Thursday. Perhaps that was an interstice of insanity between two stretches of horrible sanity. We have been restless before and we are restless now. We have been confrontational before and we are confrontational now. We were disturbed before and we are disturbed now.

It is important to remember that day. It was a day we lost control. It was a day we misbehaved. Our rage had darkened the day as we clashed with each other, as we killed six of us and danced on the corpse. It was a day we invoked the Portuguese marauders, the Afghan warlords, the British colonialists and the Pakistani invaders, all those who occupied this land and persecuted us. We became them, all our tormentors rolled into us. We became our own tyrants and we became our own victims. It was a day of us versus us.

This madness has been raising its head ever since, once in Natore, again in Pabna, thereafter in Serajgonj and most recently in Ruppogonj. Once again we saw smoke and fire, once again we heard gunshots, once again we saw people armed with sticks, bricks, guns and machetes openly pitching battles against each other. All the more reason for National Depravity Day.

We quickly tend to get split between they and us. It is some kind of national psychosis that our long history of subjugation has never left us. We still play domination and subservience, people

by people, profession by profession, political party by political party, intellectual by intellectual, businessman by businessman, uniform by uniform, musclemans by musclemans.

The Afghan, the Mughal, the British and the Pakistani oppressors still live within us. They kept us divided so that they could rule and plunder this country. Now we have divided ourselves because some of us want to make more hay while the sun shines. Funny, we have got our homegrown colonialists who treat us like their dominion.

We talk about how businessmen are creating jobs for us. We talk about how politicians have given us a free country. It is also said that Ayub Khan gave us adult franchise, the "second capital" and a television station. Hussein Mohammed Ershad gave us many roads and poetry conferences. It is said that the British gave us education. The Mughals gave us an organised administration.

Yet we fought against them because they couldn't give us a sense of pride. In freedom and subjugation we have equally despised those who divided us. All the more reason why an official day should tell us we have got enemies within us. By hurting each other, we are only hurting ourselves.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is Editor, First News and a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: badrul151@yahoo.com

Good news for bad guys

Inevitably, these war logs written in haste from the field by hard-pressed and ill-informed Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq are cherry-picked by people looking to bolster their own causes, make their own cases.

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

RAW intelligence is ugly stuff, perverse and treacherous. "A little learning is a dangerous thing," wrote the 18th-century poet Alexander Pope, who had a keen ear for political posturing. How much more dangerous is a little learning based on an inassimilable pile of hundreds of thousands of documents dumped on the public by WikiLeaks?

Inevitably, these war logs written in haste from the field by hard-pressed and ill-informed Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq are cherry-picked by people looking to bolster their own causes, make their own cases. And while the whole process of leaking and disseminating them has been widely (if warily) endorsed by antiwar liberals and moderates, there is plenty of material ready to be exploited by extremists.

The Taliban already are hard at work on the earlier leaks, looking to sniff out -- and snuff out -- those they deem informers and collaborators. But the most volatile trove in the more heavily redacted Iraq collection is, in fact, about Iran -- and it's likely to benefit the extremists in both Iran and the United States who are pushing those countries

toward war.

Full disclosure: I am a reporter of the old school. "Print the truth and raise hell," newspapermen used to say. You put the information out there without fear or favour and let people make of it what they will, and generally speaking that's the philosophy that serves the public and the press the best. But we should not be naive about the implications, especially when we're talking about life and death in places like Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Reading the WikiLeaks documents on Iranian support for attacks in Iraq, even an ardent pacifist would have to wonder just how much provocation is necessary before the United States decides to strike back with a vengeance. Extensive reports in the Iraq War Logs describe the Iranian role working with members of Lebanon's Hizbullah to train Iraqi guerrillas to ambush American soldiers.

Iran also supplied its favoured Iraqi militias with lethal, low-level technology like the roadside bombs known as EFPs, or explosively formed penetrators, able to blast through the armor of a Humvee and kill the Americans inside. (The press has reported this before, of course, but when the revelations come in "secret"

papers suddenly made public they tend to carry more weight.)

For more than 30 years the Iranians and their Hizbullah cronies have made a specialty of what one of the WikiLeaks documents describes as "precision, military style kidnappings," and their Iraqi clients picked up the techniques quickly. In 2006, one Iraqi who trained in Iran plotted to attack American troops in a Baghdad tunnel, but the intelligence apparently was good enough to prevent that. A month later, a similar attack hit U.S. soldiers in Karbala; one of whom died at the scene, and four were kidnapped, then killed.

A dispatch from last year, meanwhile, strongly suggests that three American hikers imprisoned in Iran for allegedly straying across its border with the mountainous Kurdish area of northern Iraq were in fact more than three miles from the frontier, possibly inside a small village -- and still inside Iraq -- when the Iranians or their clients picked them up. The woman among the hikers, Sarah Shourd, was recently released and is now back in the U.S., but her two companions, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, are still in a Tehran prison.

The record of Iranian bombings, ambushes, and abductions is stunning. Throughout history, wars have been launched with much less provocation, and while none of these general allegations is new, they're now being recounted at a critical time. Iran already is firing up one of its nuclear reactors, and if Americans were not so distracted by their own domestic politics right now, they would see that a violent show-

down grows more likely every day, with WikiLeaks helping the hawks in the U.S.

And then, almost out of the blue, there's a WikiLeaks to the Iranian prosecutors who reportedly have determined to put Fattal and Bauer on trial for spying. The charges brought against other victims of the regime and its courts in the past have centred around alleged plots to create propaganda undermining the militarised theocracy in Iran so it could be overthrown by a mass movement. In July 2009, when the hikers were picked up, the regime was still reeling from enormous protests against the evident fraud of the presidential elections in June that returned Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to office.

The hikers are journalists and bloggers, but their families have always maintained that they were merely in those particular mountains at that time to do a little rock-climbing.

The author of the relevant war log published by The New York Times with fewer omissions than the one on the WikiLeaks site, apparently saw the Americans' actions in a different light. The analysis at the end of the log concludes "the lack of coordination on the part of these hikers, particularly after being forewarned, indicates an intent to agitate and create publicity regarding international policies on Iran." That is just the kind of thing the prosecutors in Tehran will want to try to establish.

Sometimes it's possible to print the truth and create hell.