

## GROUND REALITIES

## Violence by rickshaw pullers

*We condemn vandalism*

HUNDREDS of rickshaw pullers went on a rampage on Monday over the authorities' move to take the three-wheelers off some more roads. The damage was immense. Private cars, CNG-driven scooters and buses all came under the wrath of the mob. It was one more instance of the violence which seems to be turning into something of a defining feature for us. In nearly every sector of life, the response to issues is these days swift, violent action, with little regard for citizens who may be going about their daily business on the streets. On Monday, school students, people going to work and others found, to their terror, that they were caught in the melee.

We condemn the vandalism that the rickshaw pullers resorted to on Monday. Of course, we understand perfectly the reasons behind such an expression of frustration on their part. But had they gone for a peaceful mode of protest, they would have only made their case that much stronger. Having said that, we feel that by putting rickshaws off certain streets as a way of easing traffic congestion in the capital the authorities have acted without considering the ramifications of their move. For their part, they inform people that the decision on making some more roads rickshaw-free was taken earlier and adequate notice had already been given about it. However, it is our view that in such conditions, notices must be repeated as a way of preparing those affected for the eventuality.

The question now concerns the thousands of middle class people for whom the rickshaw is the easiest mode of transport. There is also the issue of livelihood of many connected with this mode of transport.

To be sure, it is mind-boggling that Dhaka roads are clogged with rickshaws. Where there are a mere one lakh rickshaws plying legally, ten times that number are out there without proper documents. It is for the authorities to explain how that has come to be and how the illegal rickshaws can be phased out.

## Stalking, stabbing on rise

*Ensure conviction of criminals*

INCIDENCE of hapless girls falling victim to stalkers and petty criminals both in the cities and rural areas has been on the rise. Quite often, we come across disquieting news of a girl being either stalked, raped, stabbed or killed by young men for refusing their advances. The criminals get away through local influence and cooperation from the law enforcing authorities.

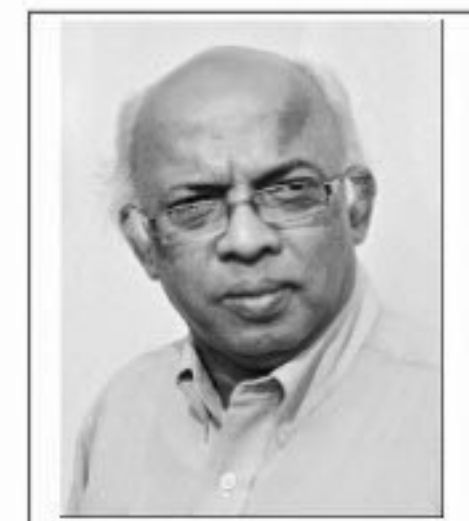
Hena died of rape and beating. The perpetrators influenced the local police and the civil surgeon to have a wrong autopsy report to steer the case in a different direction. Stalkers and discarded lovers swoop on the girls with lethal weapons resulting in severe injuries or deaths. Mahmuda Akhter, a college student of East Jurain has been the latest victim of indiscriminate stabbing by a local thug.

We are disgusted by these events and the way the cases are handled by the authorities. Despite continuous campaigning by the rights groups and measures by the judiciary against these crimes there is no sign of improvement of conditions.

To our utter dismay we find that after such incidents, in most cases, police are reluctant to take cases under local pressure. Even if cases are filed it takes a long time for the legal process to end thus allowing the real culprits to escape unscathed. The foot-dragging of legal process is taken advantage of by the culprits.

The law enforcers needs to be prompt in arresting the culprits, preparing charge sheets and starting the legal procedure without showing mercy to the perpetrators. It is time that the local police should free themselves from influence of criminals and side with the victims. Judiciary should also be prompt to mete out exemplary punishment to the perpe-

# Blake was (and is) no tourist . . .



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**R**OBERT Blake -- he is US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs -- has set alarm bells ringing in Bangladesh.

His expression of views regarding the Yunus affair is certainly understandable. The sordid manner in which the Bangladesh government has gone about humiliating the Nobel laureate has not exactly endeared us to people beyond our frontiers.

The tone and tenor in which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina castigated Muhammad Yunus recently was certainly not edifying for us. The briskness with which the Bangladesh Bank showed Yunus the door out of his very own Grameen Bank was as stupefying as it was outrageous. Finally, the Bangladesh attorney general's making it known that Sheikh Hasina and Santu Larma should have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace over the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace deal was enough to make people wonder if that was also the view of the government.

So, yes, the government of Bangladesh has been tying itself in knots over the Yunus issue. It is not just Hillary Clinton and her husband who are worried. President Obama is too. And do not forget that Mary Robinson, the formidable former president of Ireland, is justifiably angry at the treatment being meted out to independent Bangladesh's only Nobel winner. It now remains for the government, considering the embarrassment it has brought upon itself, to look for a way out of its difficulties.

The air is thick with rumours that a rapprochement between the government and the Grameen pioneer is in the works. All we can do is wait. But while we do that, we certainly note that when Blake darkly informed us that a failure on the part of the government to reach a compromise with Yunus could affect relations between Washington and Dhaka, we spotted in his remarks some very real signs of danger.

No American diplomat speaks out of turn. And no American diplomat or governing politician reveals, in public, what his private views are about a situation. Robert Blake, by such logic, was articulating the views of the Obama administration. It is of course rather queer that a state will choose to base the future of its diplomatic links with another state around particular individuals. But Washington appears to have done that and there is nothing we can do about it.

But we, through our government, indeed through the Foreign Office, could have done something swiftly to remind Blake and his people back in Washington that diplomatic niceties do not include issuing threats to a country, no matter how couched in fine language such threats may be.

Blake's words were not a gaffe. He made his remarks twice, once at the American Club and then in an interview with a Bangladesh television

channel. Much as you would prefer not to cite earlier instances of American intimidation of politicians in weaker nations, you cannot but recall Henry Kissinger's threat to Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto over the latter's nuclear plans in the mid 1970s. Kissinger promised to make a horrible example of Bhutto. And we all remember the way Bhutto's government fell before his life came to an end.

We do resent the manner in which Blake expressed his opinion on his trip to Dhaka.

And yet, Foreign Secretary Mijaral Quayes appears not to be too worried about the repercussions of Blake's remarks. The opinion of a personality or an individual does not matter, says our top diplomat. Oh yes, in this case it does. The individual Blake is of little consequence to us.

For the record, Blake is the public face of the United States and its government -- for South and Central Asia. He was not here as a tourist on a sight-seeing expedition to Bangladesh. What he says matters, despite all that talk on our part of shared values and institutions. And he has said things we do not agree with, indeed are worried by. He has ruffled our sensitivities. And what has the Bangladesh Foreign Office done about it?

It could have done a couple of things immediately after Blake's

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views came to light. It could have censured his remarks as interference in Bangladesh's domestic matters. And it could have summoned the American ambassador for a clarification of Blake's comments. It did neither.

And the foreign secretary's interpretation of the whole episode leaves us wondering about the inability or unwillingness of the government to take a position on issues of grave import for us. Foreign Minister Dipu Moni has said not a word. Why has she not?

Ambivalence has generally been a hallmark of ties between Bangladesh and the United States. In 1971, the Nixon administration, having gone for a pro-Pakistan tilt, tried working out through Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed a confederal Dhaka-Islamabad arrangement. In 1974, Bangladesh was denied American food aid because of its jute trade with Cuba.

In the same year, Tajuddin Ahmed was forced to quit office because the suspicion was that the Bangladesh government had begun veering toward a Washington-friendly stance. And if you go by what foreign journalists have had to say, Henry Kissinger perhaps had something of a role in not preventing the August 1975 coup against the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Inter-state relations are never based on ambivalence. Foreign policy works on principles tempered by pragmatism. And silence is no diplomacy.

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# Where our strengths lie

IRENE KHAN

**F**OR most people the fortieth birthday is a sobering moment. You note your achievements, then take a deep breath, and as a sign of your growing maturity, acknowledge what you must do before it is too late.

As Bangladesh marks forty years of independence, there is much to celebrate -- but also some big "must do's."

We score high on our commitment to democracy. Although Bangladesh lurched from one military dictatorship to another in its early years, for the past decade the country has remained steadfastly on the path of multi-party parliamentary democracy. The interregnum of the caretaker government only served to strengthen the people's resolve on democratic government.

The quality of our democracy, however, leaves much to be desired. State institutions are politicised, lack capacity and often suffer from corruption and nepotism. The political landscape is mired in confrontation and violence. There are ominous signs of more pre-poll violence in the run up to the Union Parishad elections.

Parliament does not function because the main opposition party does not participate properly, and the governing party insists on ruling with political triumphalism that excludes others. Parliamentarians of both sides seem more interested in exchanging invectives than engaging in debate.

This is unbecoming of a nation at 40. Ending confrontational politics has to be high in the "must do" list. The prime minister's recent call to the opposition to contribute to the forthcoming Parliamentary session is welcome, and the opposition would display maturity by responding positively.

Unlike democracy, our national attachment to secularism has been less pronounced in the past decade. Fortunately, the courts have reaffirmed the secular roots of our coun-

try, and the government is firmly committed to it, despite some debate about where exactly to draw the line between religion and politics.

As a mature nation we should acknowledge the religiosity of our people but should not let religion shape our politics, law or public policy. As a matter of fact, we are a Muslim majority country, but as a matter of national identity -- and national pride -- we are secular. To go any other way would be to betray the spirit of our independence struggle.

All citizens -- no matter of what creed or caste or gender -- are equal. The principle of equality has gained deeper meaning thanks to the recent adoption by the government of the national policy on women. It does not give full equality, nor is it enshrined in law. But it is nevertheless a very

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significant step.

A "must do" now will be to ensure that full gender equality is achieved in law as well as policy as speedily as possible. That would be the right thing for women and girls. It would be also the wise thing for the development of Bangladesh.

The clearest sign of our confidence as a nation is our willingness finally to confront the dark side of our history. The execution of the killers of Bangabandhu, the setting up of the war crimes tribunal, the indictment of some collaborators and the recent court decision on Colonel Taher's case are an important part of the process of seeking accountability and coming to terms with the past.

There has been considerable criticism of the war crimes tribunal,

including by noted international legal experts, and accusations that the indictments are politically motivated. The government should address these concerns urgently and ensure that the trials are not only fair but also seen to be fair. To heal the wounds of the past we need justice, not revenge.

Accountability should not stop with high profile political cases. All victims of human rights crimes deserve justice. That means independent investigation of all cases of torture, custodial deaths and extrajudicial killings at the hands of law enforcing agencies and prosecution of those responsible. An urgent "must do" surely has to be police and security sector reform.

Moving from the political to the social and economic, the list becomes long on the "must do's" -- and not

surprisingly so in a country where almost half the population still live below the poverty line with little or no access to basic healthcare, clean water, sanitation, housing or social protection, and where climate change threatens to wash away whatever little has been achieved.

This is not to deny the progress that has been made. A country that was laid to waste by a marauding Pakistani army only forty years ago reduced its poverty rate from 74% to 40% in those four decades, and has managed to achieve an annual growth of 5-6% for the past three years. Infant mortality has been dramatically reduced. Enrolment in primary schools has improved. Though dropout rates and the quality of education remain problematic,

gender parity has been achieved in primary and secondary schools.

These are encouraging trends but there is still a long way to go in the fight against poverty, particularly in addressing marginalisation and growing disparities. How equitably and effectively we distribute the benefits of economic growth will ultimately demonstrate our true maturity as a nation.

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The story of our nation is also the story of a dynamic civil society and its leaders who have defied authority and orthodox thinking in pursuit of freedom, equality and justice. Most are known only in their communities but some have achieved worldwide fame. Among the best known is Prof. Yunus. His pioneering work on micro-credit turned what Kissinger termed a basket case into a showcase.

During the past few months the country and the world have watched in horror and disbelief the government's treatment of Prof. Yunus. A mature nation must not tolerate such denigration. What the government "must do" is obvious -- it does not need a foreign emissary to point out the wrong that it should set right without delay.

The list would not be complete without acknowledging our great pride and joy: the Tigers who have put our country on the world map of cricket. The final "must do" is directed at ourselves as a cricket loving nation: when our team loses, accept it with grace, not violence. That's the mature response.

The writer is Consulting Editor, The Daily Star, and former head of Amnesty International.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 30

**1814** Joachim Murat issues the Rimini Declaration which would later inspire Italian Unification.

**1842** Anesthesia is used for the first time, in an operation by Dr. Crawford Long.

**1856** The Treaty of Paris is signed, ending the Crimean War.

**1867** Alaska is purchased from Russia for \$7.2 million, about 2 cent/km<sup>2</sup>, by United States Secretary of State William H. Seward. The media call this Seward's Folly.

**1912** Sultan Abdelhafid signs the Treaty of Fez, making Morocco a French protectorate.

**1940** Sino-Japanese War: Japan declares Nanking capital of a new Chinese puppet government, nominally controlled by Wang Ching-wei.

**1945** World War II: Soviet Union forces invade Austria and take Vienna; Polish and Soviet forces liberate Gdansk.

**1972** Vietnam War: The Easter Offensive begins after North Vietnamese forces cross into the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) of South Vietnam.

**1976** The first Land Day protests are held in Israel/Palestine.

**1981** President Reagan is shot. President Ronald Reagan is shot and wounded when a lone gunman opens fire in Washington.

**2006** The United Kingdom Terrorism Act 2006 becomes a law.