

Unending 'crossfire' deaths

ASK report yet another eye-opener

THE latest report by Ain-O-Salish Kendra makes dismal reading. In the past three months, according to the report, as many as thirty individuals have died in so-called crossfire incidents in the country while twenty five others died in police custody. By any standard of morality as well as legality, these incidents are appalling in nature. They fly in the face of the government's claims that no 'crossfire' deaths have occurred in all the time since it took office in January 2009. Now contrast that with a recent ministerial comment to the effect that crossfire killings have seeped into the system and it will take time for such killings to be brought to an end. Such contradictory positions are disturbing.

The figures released by ASK beg the question: what explanation does the government have on offer now that the truth is once more out there in the open? Note that ASK did not produce the figures but only put them together on the basis of news reports in the various national dailies. The one proper course for the authorities now will or should be an admission that these killings in 'crossfire' have indeed taken place and that these extra-judicial killings will be properly probed. With all the incidents of such killings that we have come across in the past two years, there can really be no point in the government's denying these reports or suggesting that the killings were basically a consequence of defence measures adopted by the law enforcers under attack from criminal elements. Such arguments lack validity and therefore credibility, for the simple reason that except for the ones killed in 'crossfire' none among the criminal gang is nabbed and none among the law enforcers is injured or killed.

The ASK report should be an eye-opener for the government, especially since the ruling party made it clear before the December 2008 elections that putting an end to extra-judicial deaths was a goal it meant to pursue. It is time for the government to adopt a definitive, decisive position against such killings through reining in the law enforcers.

We have been urging the government to realise how extra-judicial killings keep undermining the rule of law and damaging our image. Yet it falls short of responding. It is indeed high time they rolled it back.

Beaten up for a crumb of bread

We condemn the appalling outrage

A picture published in last Saturday's The Daily Star speaks volumes about our heavy-handed treatment to tender aged children. In particular it shows crowd's total insensitivity to a couple of poor and hungry urchin girls alleged to have stolen food. Whereas they should have been shown passion and the crowd feeling a sense of guilt that the society failed to provide two morsels of food to them, they behaved as if devoid of humanity.

Piya and Shumi shouldn't be more than eight years old, or even less, and their frailty is evident of the poverty that they are caught up in with teeming millions of children. They couldn't be habitual thieves; even if they were they hardly deserved to be treated so brutally. It seems to be a simple case of food-lifting by direly famished children.

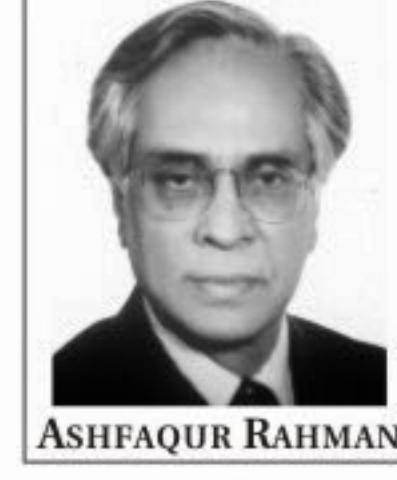
In any case, the matter calls for some serious introspection at the societal level. Impoverished children in our country may be forced to resort to petty thefts for survival so that the problem is struck at its root.

There's huge wastage of food everyday from the households and the hotels. Leftovers are either taken away by people who don't need them or thrown into the bins for urchins to pick up. It's an affront to humanity.

We have our government, social welfare ministry, ministry for women and children affairs, children rights groups, human rights organizations and scores of voluntary bodies who work for distressed children. Sadly, whereas urchins should have been taken under the wings of shelter homes, they are falling prey to trafficking, sexual exploitation and petty crimes.

Instead of ensuring food and schooling for them we beat them up for nibbling food. Piyas and Shumis should be taken care of because we have a collective responsibility towards them.

The message from Mohali



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

SO India has won the World Cup cricket semifinal match against Pakistan held in Mohali last week. The margin of win was only 29 runs.

But to the 1.1 billion Indians it was a milestone victory.

But before the game, the atmospherics in the two countries were highly charged. The rival nations were already at war with each other in the virtual world.

A Pakistani message was succinct. It read: "Hindustan walo, dushmani mat karo. Tumhari Munni badnam hai, Sheila jawan hai aur hamara captain Pathan hai." The essence of it was "Don't mess with us, we know how to pin you down."

Indian messages were also acerbic. When Pakistan Home Minister Rehman Malik landed in a Pakistan Air Force plane in Chandigarh, he tweeted: "Landed in incredible India." Indian tweeters shot back with not so decent replies. The minister immediately deleted his tweet. But many Indian well-wishers welcomed Malik to India. He then resumed his tweet and said: "Great landing in India. Thanks for all your countless welcome messages."

It was in such a combustible atmosphere that the cricket match had begun. But soon two aspects stood out for all to notice. First, the Indian crowd at the stadium did not jeer or throw garbage at the Pakistani supporters. They waved their flags at each other. It was good cheer all around.

The next thing was the presence in Mohali of the prime ministers of Pakistan and India to watch the game. It was the Indian prime minister who had intuitively invited his Pakistani counterpart. The Pakistani prime minister accepted the invitation and came with a delegation. Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul were there too, sometimes sitting among the com-

mon spectators.

Prime Minister Manmohan did not consult the Indian Foreign Office when he took the initiative to invite his Pakistani counterpart. By so doing he did away in one sweep all the inertia and suspicion that had built up after the Mumbai bombings in relations with Pakistan.

He thus used cricket as the excuse to bring the two peoples and the two prime ministers together. The bureaucrats in the two countries had now to perform draw up an agenda for the talks at Mohali.

But let us digress a little and discuss the match itself. India was of course the favourite team but Pakistan failed to craft a winning strategy. Pakistan's captain Afridi had brought in fast bowlers to intimidate Indian batsmen. But by so doing he spared the Indian batsmen the devastation that could have been wrought

by his spin bowlers. It enabled India to pile up 260 runs quickly.

When it was Pakistan's turn to bat, Afridi did not group his good batsmen together so that effective partnerships could build up. Thus some of the best known Pakistani batsmen stood alone and could not produce enough runs to challenge the Indian total.

Afridi himself also batted at the tail end of the Pakistan innings. His performance was far from what was expected. He also had agreed to power play towards the end of their innings. This seemed to be a mistake as tail end batsmen like Misbah could not or perhaps did not take advantage of the opportunity.

So it was brittle batting by Pakistan and sparkling bowling by Indians which ultimately pulled down Pakistan.

However, the excitement of the

game was more than matched by the successful outcome of bilateral talks that were held almost simultaneously in New Delhi between the home secretaries of the two countries. There were two breakthroughs in these talks.

First, Pakistan agreed to allow Indian investigators to visit and question the persons jailed there and who were responsible for the Mumbai bombings in 2008. The Indian home secretary reacted positively to the outcome and commented: "We have moved forward and the trust deficit has reduced." The two sides in the meeting also agreed to set up a hotline to discuss terror threats in real time.

But then, what is next after this successful outcome? The two prime ministers also discussed some of the outstanding issues. The conversation was continued over dinner at Mohali.

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There is now likely to be a meeting in the middle of this year to address the following disputes in a "composite dialogue."

India blames Pakistan, especially its powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) Agency, for the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. But Pakistan accuses India of backing separatists in her Baluchistan province and providing weapons and funding. India, however, denies all this.

India in turn worries that an Afghanistan which is influenced by Pakistan Taliban after a US pullout would allow anti-Indian elements a base from which to launch attacks. The US is also exasperated with the situation. The composite talks are likely to address the issue.

The most important dispute between the two countries is over the Muslim majority Himalayan territory

of Kashmir. Separatists started an insurgency there against India in 1989. This insurgency has killed tens of thousands. Pakistan wants US to intervene but the US is reluctant and calls Kashmir a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. Kashmir will deserve a place in the future talks.

Sharing of water flowing down rivers that rise in Indian Kashmir and run into the Indus basin is another bone of contention. Pakistan accuses India of diverting some of this water due to her.

The last major dispute between the two countries is about Siachen Glacier. Both the sides want to find a solution that would allow them to withdraw troops from this highest altitude battlefield in the world.

But India wants Pakistan to officially authenticate the position they hold. Pakistan is willing to do soon on condition that it will not consider this as final endorsement of India's claim over the glacier.

Given the complex nature of all these disputes, the breakthrough in the home secretaries' talks in Delhi had encouraged the sides to now move forward on the other issues.

Both India and Pakistan are saying: "All right, let's proceed, you send our chaps and we will send our chaps and let's get on with it."

The signal coming out from Mohali is also that the people of India and Pakistan are tired of the present state of relations. They want to see peace break out in their region and economic prosperity to follow. The message from the cricket pitch is clear. It is all about "getting on" with the job of resolving the disputes.

As both the peoples want change in their relations they expect the winter of their discontent to be replaced by a summer of hope. We in Bangladesh can wish both the countries well in their efforts.

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Faces of Facebook



MILIA ALI

ONE of the most revolutionary inventions of this decade has been Facebook -- the enormously popular and addictive social

website that has consumed the lives of so many. An interesting feature of Facebook, founded by Harvard dropout Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, is its ability to suck people into a virtual world of their illusionary selves re-created with glamorous photographs, racy video clips, and punchy self descriptions. Facebook can thus easily transform the introvert into a flamboyant online persona!

It is a testimony to Facebook's social omnipresence that director David Fincher was inspired into making a film, "The Social Network," based on Mark Zuckerberg's life during the creation and development of the website. The movie generated some very intense reviews and ended up bagging three Oscars this February!

It portrays Zuckerberg both as a protagonist and a villain, as the story moves to and fro from his life at Harvard when he developed Facebook (purportedly because of a rejection by his girl friend) to the time when he was sued by three of his fellow students, one of them his best friend. All three claimed that Mark reaped all the benefits of the billion dollar invention for which they deserved some credit.

Disappointingly, the film does not address the issue of Facebook's vast influence on the lives of its users but focuses on the founder and his

endeavours in the broader context of the ruthless, competitive world of business.

Recently, Facebook has come into the limelight for a different reason. It played a crucial role in the mass uprising throughout the Middle East, which has been termed by many as the "Facebook Revolution." Along with Twitter and Google, Facebook made it possible for the disaffected people in these countries to express their discontent and overcome the obstacles to collective action, in a dictatorial system.

According to Mr. Acemoglu, an MIT Professor studying revolutionary organisations, social media acted as a catalyst to spur the revolution in Egypt since it "assured and comforted opponents of a dictator that their views were widely shared

and that they would not be singled out for protesting in Tahrir Square."

On a more personal level, I am grateful to the network because of the innovative means of communication that it opened up for me. It has certainly enlarged my world of friends, family, and acquaintances. There are also many heart wrenching stories about family members and friends reuniting after having been "lost" for many years.

However, I do have some doubts about the way Facebook has rede-

fined the interactive process, blurring the lines between public and personal domains. This is especially true when career opportunities are lost due to unauthorised prowling by potential employers. One research concludes that 45% of the companies use Facebook to gather information about job applicants without their knowledge. There is another aspect to this voyeurism -- businesses that reportedly offer analysis of what users write on Facebook and similar sites, have sprung and flourished in all

corners of the marketing world.

In addition to the privacy concerns, critics have cautioned Facebook management against the mindless pursuit of commercial interests and an obsession with profits. They note that behind the "dollars signs" there are real human beings ... laying

bare their feelings and thoughts and details about their friends, families and jobs. If a wrong piece of information were to reach the wrong person or criminals or stalkers it could be used to virtually wreck people's lives. Recent cases of bullying by peers and hounding by homophobes, have had tragic consequences where lives were ended, ruined, and extreme trauma experienced.

There is also a deeper moral issue to be considered: the opportunity that Facebook provides for snooping,

prying, status-gauging and perhaps drawing conclusions without giving a chance to the person at the other end to defend his or her position. The site may have been developed as a tool for enhancing human interaction and communication, but in some circumstances it may have dehumanised personal relationships.

Despite all the concerns and the risks, what makes Facebook special is that people feel comfortable in its nurturing realm of friends and family, whom they trust. To counter each negative story one can find many positive experiences of doting grandmas watching grandchildren take their first step from miles away, loving parents staying connected to their children without appearing to take control of their lives, and, most importantly, friends articulating their appreciation and adulation in so many innovative ways.

However, an important feature of communicating through Facebook is that it's a social space created through mutual trust and well-being. So, as an ardent user, here is my appeal to Facebook's founder: "Mark, I know that more advertisements and research companies mean more revenues but, I believe, that's not why you created Facebook. Please don't disrupt the social safety net that you enabled us to build, by opening it up to profiteers and commercial predators. If the trust factor is eliminated from the network, it will no longer be what it started out to be for many of us: a private, warm and safe haven for sharing personal feelings and information!"

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of World Bank.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 3

1922

Joseph Stalin becomes the first General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1942

World War II: Japanese forces begin an assault on the United States and Filipino troops on the Bataan Peninsula.

1948

President Harry S. Truman signs the Marshall Plan, authorising \$5 billion in aid for 16 countries.

1968

Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech.

1969

Vietnam War: U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announces that the United States will start to "Vietnamize" the war effort.

1973

The first portable cell phone call is made in New York City, United States.

1982

The United Kingdom sends a naval task force to the south Atlantic to reclaim the disputed Falkland Islands from Argentina.

2004

Islamic terrorists involved in the 11 March 2004 Madrid attacks are trapped by the police in their apartment and kill themselves.