

BITTER TRUTH

Surging crime takes alarming turn



We live in violent times. The incidents of murder, rape and extortion no longer strike our senses

much. Even then, the killing of Aminul Haque, a businessman cum hotel owner of Rajshahi city, left people numb with horror, shock and pain. Even in a country where life is extinguished so easily, there was a feeling of revulsion about the manner of killing. To kill someone and then shred the lifeless body to pieces is simply barbaric.

Police recovered Aminul Haque's decomposed body cut into nine pieces from the rented house of killer Sarwar Hossain at Alupatty in Rajshahi city three days into his abduction. The most tragic part of the story is that he was killed even after payment of the ransom of Tk.20 lakh, which the police recovered from Sarwar's house. Police have arrested Sarwar and his employee Hakim.

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Horrifying incidents of hijacking, extortion, killing and rape that fill the pages of newspapers with alarming frequency lead one to believe that the country has fallen into the clutches of barbaric forces. The eroding public confidence in the administration could have ominous implications in different spheres of public life.

We have learnt to live in a terror infested country. But even then, when such gruesome acts of terror are committed by cherubic kids next door, one is shocked beyond measure. Some ghastly incidents of the recent past will illustrate how young men in the age group 14-22 are slipping into crime. Some of them in the meantime have become so notorious and such hardened criminals that even when the public can identify them the law enforcement people cannot.

The savage killing of Pulak Pal by tender aged boys is a pathetic reminder of the barbaric underworld activities now spreading among the kids who are supposed to be the most innocent. It's hard to believe and harder still to comprehend that such brutality could be committed

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by men so young and so tender for a flimsy reason. But it is true.

The majority of the heinous crimes are being committed today by those perceived as the most innocent -- the youth. Sure, the youth have never been angels and adolescence is often a time for rebellion and rage. But these young criminals operating individually or mostly in gangs, seem to come from the affluent and middle class families, and the crimes they commit are more widespread and vicious than ever before.

Newspaper reports and human rights organisations have been saying that the crime rate in the country has skyrocketed but, shockingly, till now there has been no in-depth analysis as to why such trend continues to rise so menacingly.

The crime situation is showing an alarming trend, not only in metropolitan Dhaka but in the countryside also. Everyday in the cities and also in remote villages businessmen get robbed, commuters get mugged and stabbed, women get raped and jilted boy friends out of desperation on refusal throw acid on girls they want to seduce. More importantly, for well-known criminal gang leaders, a generation of hired killers, mostly in their teens, is now available. Taking life is so easy for these

criminals who are still in the prime of their life

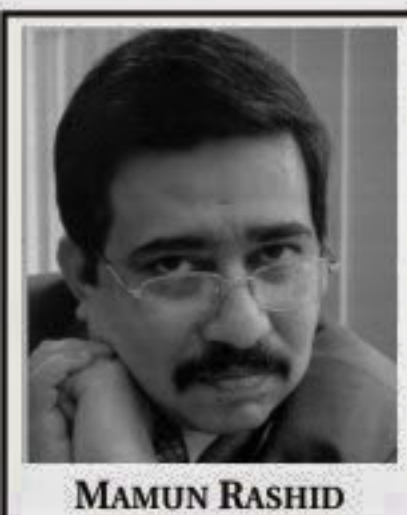
The youngsters born in the late '80s grew up in a world full of scams, fraudulence and corruption. In a fast changing society they want ready success and believe that they can use any means to achieve their ends. Ambitions soar and then cravings for owning cars, houses and exotic life styles play in their minds. They can't accept failure and suddenly find that brute force has a premium. There are no icons today whom they can adore. They stray into crime to make a quick buck.

Ironically true, large sections of the populace seem disillusioned with the court, police and administrative integrity. If the evidence is anything to go by, the criminal, the politician and the bureaucrat in the country seem to have always been good friends. Each has use for the other, a nexus that has time and again been shown as lucrative. Even if a criminal is arrested he often comes out of prison by taking advantage of the loopholes in the law. Tragically, justice is rarely delivered, because once it is off the front pages in the newspapers, the case is forgotten.

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THIRD EYE

Attacking poverty



DR. Fakhruddin Ahmed, after joining Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation (PKSF), paid an extensive visit to

the country's north and south zones to see the progress of the poverty alleviation programmes initiated by member organisations supported by PKSF. After the visit, he told me that people in rural Bangladesh were moving up the curve.

Afterwards, courtesy MFIs like TMSS, Buro Bangladesh, Shakti and Marie Stopes, I attended para/village meetings in many districts. I could not but fully agree with Dr. Ahmed that rural Bangladesh was changing fast. People can afford to buy more food, drinks, life style items or even luxury ones. We saw massive billboards of Pran juice, Mum water and even Walton television in the rural areas in Rangpur and Dinajpur.

This was possible due to good harvest for the last several years, increasing remittances, safety-net programmes, expansion of rural farm and non-farm credit, rise of micro-entrepreneurship and, more importantly, shifting the terms of trade in favour of rural Bangladesh during crisis period. Besides, there has been significant improvement in rural wage level.

Where Bangladesh Khetmajur Samity (association of land labourers) demanded a daily wage equivalent to three and half kilograms of rice in 1984, it is now equivalent to 6 kilograms of rice. As a result, where almost 80% people were below poverty level in 1972, the number came down to 40% in 2005.

I was privy to a pre-budget discussion at the ministry of finance, where the house was briefed on possible outcome of the recently held 2010 household income-expenditure survey (HIES), and was told that the number of people living below the poverty line was likely to come down to 31-32%.

Per year poverty reduction during 2000-2005 was around 1.78%, which improved to 2% during 2005-2010 period due to various budgetary measures (guaranteed employment, vulnerable group feeding, food for works and other employment generation or social safety-net programmes) taken by the government and non-government initiatives with regard to entrepreneurship development and

financing. As mentioned earlier, according to HIES-2005, 40% of the population used to live below poverty level. During the last 5-years poverty has decreased by almost 10%. The latest survey was conducted from February 1, 2010 to January 31 this year, based on people's basic needs. In this survey Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) method instead of Daily Calorie Intake (DCI) method was used.

The mentioned survey reveals that average household monthly income in urban areas is Tk.15,000 and Tk.9,000 in rural areas. In the 2005 survey it was Tk.10,463 in urban areas and Tk.6,096 in rural areas. The highest monthly average income was seen in Dhaka

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Division -- more than Taka 11,000 -- and the minimum monthly average income was found in Rangpur Division -- Tk.7,000.

Expenditure on food has decreased a bit in relation to income. The recent survey shows that 54.81% of income is used to buy food, which was 60% in 2005. Urban people have to pay more for food -- 58.81% of their income -- than rural people, who spend 48.19%. The survey assumed 4.50 members per household.

Bangladesh bureau of statistics took 612 Primary Sample Units (PSU) from all over the country for this survey. In every PSU, 20 households were chosen from 250 households after analysing the members' occupation, life-style, social status etc.

For 15 days in a row, surveyors observed the lifestyle of the household members. What kind of food they consumed, what type of clothing they wore, their assets, occupations and many other topics came under surveyors' observation.

Although prices of goods have risen, poverty has decreased due to increase in income. Employment opportunity has also increased in rural areas with increased wages.

If we follow the GDP growth during the last five years, poverty should have decreased to 27-28%. However, due to global recession and natural calamities locally, it didn't happen. It is said that 1% increase in GDP should result in 0.6% reduction in poverty level.

Keeping that in cognisance, I would think 31-32% poverty rate according to recent HIES is convincing.

While recognition has been given to cohesive policy undertaken through the budgetary measures, especially for the disadvantaged populace and regions, the minister and staff of the ministry of finance deserve special kudos for not having lost sight of the poor people and for trying to bring them up the curve. Bangladesh's social safety net programmes (84 in number) are some of the best in the region.

However, we need to do more in a focused manner, by allocating increased quota for the disadvantaged target groups, energising the local governments and, most importantly, capacity building in the concerned ministries, specially health, education, food, agriculture, local government and communication.

We often hear that spending one taka in the right way is much tougher than earning one taka through tax incidences. Lately, our development partners have started to voice their concern regarding aid effectiveness as well as qualitative expenditure to divert funding to the right streams of the economy with due accountability.

Here, one should not also forget that wealth creation is happening in both urban and rural areas at the cost of few most vulnerable groups; therefore, while poverty is reducing, income is growing, and income inequality is also growing. It seems we can't do much about this, other than focusing more on distribution economics.

We can of course always tame the situation and bring down the "passenger" population (almost 10% of the total population) size through targeted investment in health and education infrastructure, along with a social awareness campaign. However, under no circumstances should we forget about encouraging wealth creation to support growth and entrepreneurship.

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Leave them alone, please

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

THE parliamentary body on education ministry formed a parliamentary sub-committee last year to probe the law enforcement agencies' actions against teachers and students during the August 21-22, 2007 student unrest on the DU campus. The parliamentary body, on February 27, 2011, asked the then chief adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed and former army chief General Moeen U Ahmed to appear before it.

The former chief adviser to caretaker government Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, who is now living in the US, expressed his inability to appear before the parliamentary probe body to give testimony on atrocities against Dhaka University teachers and students. Dr. Fakhruddin, in a written statement to the parliamentary body, however, claimed the then interim government tried "its best to defuse the violent situation."

In the statement, he claimed that he was not involved in atrocities against teachers and students of Dhaka University during the tenure of the last caretaker government. Narrating the steps taken by his government he suggested that the parliamentary probe body go through the enquiry report, which, in his words, "was published by the then caretaker government."

Former army chief General Moeen U Ahmed, now also in the US, who also expressed his inability to attend the hearing, has claimed he was not involved in atrocities on teachers and students of Dhaka University centring the much-talked-about campus violence during the last caretaker government's tenure.

Moeen also claimed he had tried his utmost and worked as per instructions from the then council of advisers of the caretaker government to "improve law and order situation." Like Dr. Fakhruddin, General Moeen also suggested that the House probe body take help from the findings of the judicial enquiry committee on the DU violence formed by the then caretaker government.

The sub-committee, however, was dissatisfied with the written replies of Dr. Fakhruddin and General Moeen, and said their statements were "meaningless" as they did not say anything about the repression and inhuman treatment of teachers and students by

law enforcement agencies. They have been asked to appear before it on June 5.

This is, albeit unfortunately, not for the first time that such inhuman treatment was meted out to teachers and students. However, this is the first time a parliamentary body has summoned the chief executive of an erstwhile government and the former chief of staff of the armed forces. Both of them, incidentally, had to take upon themselves the monumental task

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of steering the nation away from an impending catastrophe.

Dr. Fakhruddin had to head a government, not a fully constitutional one per se, guided more by the "doctrine of necessity." It will always remain a debatable issue whether the declaration of emergency on January 11, 2007 was a necessity. However, given the fact that country was heading from the rubble of the BNP-Jamaat rule towards the ruins by the lajuddin-led CTG, any form of deviation from this path was a welcome respite. The massive popularity that the Fakhruddin-led CTG enjoyed in the initial months of its tenure testified to the justification for 1/11.

Over the next two years, the actions and inaction of the government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed would give rise to speculation about the presence of seemingly multiple governments within the government. The unfortunate incident of August 21-22 was apparently the outcome of the existence of such multiple governments.

The appointment of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed as the chief adviser was laudable. I wrote a number of pieces in The Daily Star singling him out as the chief asset to the government. In fact, I could not find anyone better than Dr.

Fakhruddin to lead the CTG, both in quality and objectivity. However, many actions of the government, especially of the so-called joint forces, embarrassed such a decent person.

On the same token, unlike other generals who lectured the nation one time or the other, General Moeen's smiling face and soft delivery did not show that he was lecturing an ignorant nation or that he was an army general teaching the "bloody civilians" lessons.

Shrugging off all the apprehensions, the general election was at last held with unprecedented 85% turnout of the eligible voters in a free and fair environment. The landmark election has not only given the country a popular and representative government, but has also greatly elevated the dignity of the nation in the international arena.

In fact, had there been no General Moeen, the election slated for January 22 would have been held, and none of the honourable members of the parliamentary probe committee who have summoned these two leaders today would be there to exercise their absolute authority.

General Moeen who, at the warranted moment, rose above personal gratitude to the person who appointed him to his position that gave him the power to change the course of the nation, which was otherwise heading towards an inevitable catastrophe, must be given due commendation. During those turbulent days, his ability to maintain total discipline, with some exceptions such as the August 21-22 incident, in the rank and file of his men reflected his strong leadership, failing which the nation could have plunged into turmoil.

He did not follow the footsteps of two of his predecessors by usurping state power. Had he wanted to follow that route, it was very clear in the aftermath of the August 21-22 incident itself that there was no dearth of University professors who would be queuing to ride his handwagon. In a random and on-line survey conducted by DS among its readers around 60% of the respondents believe that the summoning is intended to harass them. It will only benefit the nation if they are left alone.

The writer is Convener, Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.