

KALEIDOSCOPE

Brutal, barbaric

We condemn the executions

PUBLIC beheading of eight Bangladeshis on charges of robbery, killing and 'creating a reign of terror' in Riyadh as far back as in 2007 has rocked the country. It has been draconian, and thoroughly repugnant to norms of civility and human sensibilities. We condemn this with all the force of the language we are capable of mustering.

Saudi Arabia is revered as the birth place of the Prophet (SM) and of the religion Islam itself; it's a place of pilgrimage for the Muslims throughout the world. That is all the more reason why the pleas for mercy including that of the President of the Republic of Bangladesh were expected to be responded to upholding the true spirit of Islam which values humanity and compassion.

Execution itself as an act of delivering justice is on an exit course, but to make a public show of as many as eight beheadings of whatever nationality is the crudest display of an aberrant justice.

Quite clearly, for one murder, eight executions have been caused, leaving aside three more Bangladeshis receiving jail sentences and suffering flogging: Are we to understand that all the eight had killed a single person? What a travesty!

Legally and procedurally, retributive justice has seemingly been delivered in the name of 'law.' By the authorities' own admission, the guilty verdict was pronounced on the basis of 'confessions,' giving rise to a possible misgiving of those having been procured under duress. The Bangladesh mission reportedly provided legal counsel, though contested by the family, to those in the dock. But the accused or defendants were constrained by their shortcoming in Arabic language on top of the procedure itself lacking in transparency to be able to take appropriate defence.

We note with trepidation that the dead bodies have not been handed over to Bangladesh authorities. But don't the families of the executed have a right to bury them at home and perform ziarat at their graves? We demand the dead bodies be handed over.

For all we know, Philippines protested when some of their citizens were executed in Saudi Arabia. They raised a hue and cry.

The two million Bangladeshi workers earn us foreign exchange but also signally contribute to the Saudi economy. Our self respect demands that we strongly protest this inhuman act.

Meghna Bridge in danger

Please do something quickly

WITHOUT sounding alarmist, we would like to underscore the dire strait in which the only bridge serving the road link between the capital and the port city of Chittagong currently is.

The report in this newspaper listing the major flaws, like scouring of its piers, damage to the expansion joints etc, only leaves us wondering at the way the bridge was planned, managed and monitored.

One wonders how one can explain away the various damages sustained in the last twenty years since it was commissioned. Was it not the job the planners to forecast the likely number of vehicles that would use the bridge at the planning stage to cater for the load for at least the duration of its planned life span, which is 100 years, and not just 20?

And why should vehicles heavier than the permissible weight are allowed on the bridge. Whose job, may we ask, is it to ensure that no overloaded vehicles use the bridge. We have heard of weighing stations on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway put up at huge cost being in a state of disrepair. Should some one not answer for it?

Experts are suggesting that regular monitoring of the bridge was not done and one can also say with certainty neither was regular repair and maintenance of it. One can only feel a sense of utter frustration to see a very important strategic structure left to wither out without proper care.

Given its strategic importance we feel that the Meghna Bridge as it stands today is absolutely inadequate to meet the requirements. A single lane bridge on the major road link is absolutely inadequate. And so apart from restoration of the bridge, whose work must start immediately, we suggest that the government address the need

Is govt ready to take unpleasant steps?



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

NOTED economists of the country at a dialogue held in *The Daily Star* last Thursday expressed their concern over the performance of the economy. The issues that came out in sharp focus from the discussion revolved mainly around high rate of inflation coupled with dipping of the foreign currency reserve due to financing of the import bill for rental power plants.

Officially, the inflation has often been attributed to external factors, especially to the growing financial crises in the US and the EU nations. True, our imports from these countries are huge and inflationary trends in those economies have their impact on us. The former World Bank Official Sadiq Ahmed, for instance, disagreed with the view that the inflation was imported. In fact, the domestic factors propelling the inflation are too obvious to be wished away.

Beyond the abstract theoretical economic jargons, to which the man in the street is not privy, the best way to have a feel of inflation is to go to the marketplaces where the common people have to visit everyday to buy the essential commodities. The prices are galloping up not in a matter of weeks or months. Those are skyrocketing in days. From the kitchen markets to the transport fares to house rents to utility prices, everywhere the costs have gone for as it were a hyper drive without any let up. Except to those who have unearned money to

remain insensitive to this accelerating rise in the cost of living, the common people from the day labourers to those belonging to the lower and middle income groups, life is becoming unbearable. Is the origin of this exponential rise in the living costs entirely external in origin?

Is it not strange that the value of Taka is plummeting vis-à-vis dollar and other foreign currencies, when in many developing economies the opposite is happening? Are those countries also not hooked to the same overseas economies to be impacted by them?

To track down and then catch these ill-gotten money-holders would require tough measures. Has the government the political will to go that length?

Understandably, the economists at the dialogue pointed to the domestic factors including high level of government borrowing from the banks, unhealthy credit growth, swelling import bills from oil imports, sudden spurt of Annual Develop Programme (ADP) spending in the closing months of fiscal year, falling rate of investment, increase in consumption spending of foreign exchange, especially the remittance dollars and so on are militating against the stability in the market as the economy as a whole. But over and above these, political intervention in the financial institutions has been making things further worse.

To get rid of the predicament the major prescription of the economists has been to curb inflation by all means. But that needs drastic monetary policy, which has to be restrictive

in nature. That also involves restricting growth. However, the growth has already got stuck in the mud of infrastructural constraints like shortage of power and fuel. So far as fiscal management through budgetary measures is concerned, it, too, may require some restrictive steps. That traditionally involves raising revenues through increasing taxes, which would entail hitting the common people further below the belt. It would also affect economic growth. The government has already been borrowing extensively from banks to

To track down and then catch these ill-gotten money-holders would require tough measures. Has the government the political will to go that length?

finance government programmes. Job creation for the poor needs increased government spending which, again, would lead to further pushing the inflationary pressure upwards. So, the government is already in a tight spot in striking a balance between restrictive budgetary and monetary policies.

It has to be borne in mind that raising tax rates is not the only way to increase revenue earnings. The government has long been talking of expanding the tax base to include greater number of people in the tax net. And to that end, measures taken so far include easing and streamlining the process of filing tax returns. Other steps like tax fairs to popularise tax-giving among the people have also been taken. But who are these people that the government has been targeting to enhance revenue receipts? Most of them belong to the middle income

group. But have they not already been taxed too much by the high living costs driven by unbearable price spiral? The very rich, on the other hand, cannot be unaware about the importance of paying taxes. But they are hardly willing because the administration is being rather soft on them.

The economists at the dialogue has suggested taking harsh, unpopular measures to address the present economic situation and the ways they have indicated were spelt out in rather general terms like arresting inflation, containing price spiral, cutting subsidy, discouraging rental power and so on.

But what about being harsh on the tax-dodgers from among the rich?

An example of harsh step could also include getting a correct report on the wealth status of the very rich section of the population. And if their wealth is properly taxed, that would go to boost to the government's revenue earning.

The pervasive corruption in each and every department of the administration is one of the biggest sources of the unearned black money. The money earned through this illicit means is usually spent in buying lands, buildings, expensive cars, going for foreign tours and in conspicuous consumption.

A close watch on these transactions and spending would help to home in on the holders of the black money. To track down and then catch these ill-gotten money-holders would require tough measures. Has the government the political will to go that length?

The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star.

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Police excesses will backfire



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE Chhattisgarh police seem to have lost all sense of decency, legality, even sanity. The Supreme Court's recent judgement

ordering the disbanding of the state-sponsored anti-Naxalite Salwa Judum militia has not dampened their obsession with crushing the Maoists.

Last month, they arrested a young Adivasi, Lingaram Kodopi, in Chhattisgarh's Dantewada district. They last week raided the house of Kavita Srivastava, People's Union of Civil Liberties general secretary, in Jaipur.

Forty policemen forced their way into the house, ransacked it and took away various objects, without showing them to the residents, and without producing a search warrant in advance. Such harassment of a well-known human-rights defender is a grave offence.

The police wrongly said they had firm information that a key Dantewada Naxal, Soni Sori, was hiding in Srivastava's house. Sori was arrested the next day in Delhi.

Sori is the aunt of Kodopi who, the police claim, was caught red-handed in a village market collecting a Rs.15-lakh bribe from the Essar business group for the Communist Party-Maoist. Sori was also arrested, say the police, but escaped. But this doesn't match eyewitness accounts. By the police's own version, the hardcore Maoists miraculously escaped.

The whole thing sounds like a cock-and-bull story. Sori's family is a victim of the Maoists. In June, Maoists attacked her house, badly wounded her father, looted valuables, and trussed up the entire family and abducted it into the forest. The father is still in hospital.

The family is also a victim of police excesses. In 2009, Kodopi was forced to join Salwa Judum. He was released

through legal intervention. But the police in July last year claimed he was a senior weapons-trained Naxal commander.

The claim appeared so laughable to all who knew Kodopi as simple and politically untutored that it was retracted. Kodopi worked with Gandhian activist Himanshu Kumar, who ran an *ashram* in Dantewada until the police burnt it down. Kodopi seems to be an innocent caught between the Naxals and the police.

Kodopi soon enrolled himself as a journalism student near Delhi. Earlier this year, after the police set three villages in Dantewada on fire, he

unconstitutional. It has passed a law creating an "auxiliary armed force" to "assist security forces" dealing with the Maoist/Naxalite violence.

The Act says that notwithstanding "any judgment, order or decree of any court," all Salwa Judum recruits shall have "the right to remain at the post." In fact, their salaries will be upgraded and they will be given six months' special training.

Nothing could constitute a greater violation of the Supreme Court's judgement. The SPOs can now practice Chengiz Khan-style violence to "teach the Naxalites a lesson" and strike fear in the hearts of innocent civilians.

The Naxalite problem cannot be resolved by the use of military/paramilitary force, but only by a combination of normal police methods and redressal of the genuine grievances which create cesspools of discontent, which the Maoists exploit.

returned there and video-recorded the victims' testimonies.

Kodopi seems to have been targeted for intense harassment because he's an upright and honest citizen who knows Gondi, the local language, and the forest terrain, and because he has exposed police atrocities.

This makes him "dangerous" in the same way as Binayak Sen, an outstanding public-spirited health activist and civil-rights defender, who too had documented state excesses.

Sori was arrested when visiting a local police station last month with a petition seeking compensation for the attack on her home in June. The police claimed, without evidence, that she was part of the Maoists' bribery operation.

These incidents show the Chhattisgarh administration has become lawless. Citizens feel insecure against its depredations. It has no intention of honouring the Supreme Court verdict declaring Salwa Judum

In this, the state government must have felt greatly encouraged by the Centre's decision to file a review petition against the original judgement.

This said, "the fight against Maoist/Naxalite violence cannot be conducted purely as a mere law and order problem... The primordial problem lies deep within the socio-economic policies pursued by the state on a society that was already endemically... suffering from gross inequalities. Consequently, the fight against Maoists/Naxalites is no less a fight for moral, constitutional and legal authority over the minds and hearts of our people."

In violation of this Constitutional advice, the state will brutalise people even further. This is a recipe for its total loss of legal and moral authority, and for the degeneration of governance into something resembling martial law, like in parts of India's Northeast.

Already, 15 helicopter gunships and large numbers of unmanned aerial

vehicles have been inducted into the central-eastern Adivasi belt. Roughly 91,000 paramilitary personnel have been deployed, 65,000 of them trained by the Indian Army in counter-insurgency.

The Army is itself monitoring the Maoist "threat," according to a recently released WikiLeaks cable which quotes an "unusually candid" conversation with the present Army chief VK Singh from February 2010, when he headed the Eastern Command.

None of this bodes well for India's democracy. The Naxalites or Maoists are not a wholesome, democratic political current despite their articulation of popular grievances and aspirations in India's increasing skewed society, with its multiple deprivations and injustices.

Added to this are the problems specific to the Adivasi belt arising from the plunder of its rich mineral and forest wealth.

The Maoists' strategy of overthrowing the Indian state through an armed revolution is utopian, and fails to recognise both the strength and value of democracy, and the armed might of the state.

Their methods, which include senseless violence, sometimes against their own cadres (to enforce loyalty), as well as innocent civilians, are unworthy of those who want a social transformation. They also selectively conclude with "class enemies" like mining and industrial corporations and traders, and resort to extortion to raise resources.

However, the Naxalite problem cannot be resolved by the use of military/paramilitary force, but only by a combination of normal police methods and redressal of the genuine grievances which create cesspools of discontent, which the Maoists exploit.

By stooping to the same lawlessness as the Maoists, the state risks losing its legitimacy, thus degrading India's democracy.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist. Email: bidwai@bol.net.in.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 10

680
Battle of Karbala: Hussain bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, is decapitated by forces under Caliph Yazid I. This is commemorated by Muslims as Ashurah.

1911
The Wuchang Uprising leads to the demise of Qing Dynasty, the last Imperial court in China, and the founding of the Republic of China.

1942
The Soviet Union establishes diplomatic relations with Australia.

1945
The Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang signed a principle agreement in Chongqing about the future of post-war China. Later, the pact is commonly referred to as the Double-Ten Agreement.

1967
The Outer Space Treaty, signed on January 27 by more than sixty nations, comes into force.

2009
After having closed borders for about two hundred years, Armenia and Turkey sign protocols in Zurich, Switzerland to open their borders.