

KALEIDOSCOPE

Spate of disappearances

Stop this macabre crime

It is with utmost concern that we notice the increasing incidences of mysterious disappearances. Some of these persons have remained untraceable for a long time while dead bodies of many have turned up at different places of the country. In fact only in the last eleven months there have been instances of 22 disappearances out of which 10 dead bodies have been found. Last year at least 18 people went missing.

This is indeed a sad commentary on the state of the country's HR and law and order. There cannot be a more abysmal state of human security when the victims' relatives cry out agonizingly their preference for 'crossfire deaths' to disappearances. At least the bodies could be found.

The most disconcerting aspect of it is that most of those who remain untraceable after being, allegedly, picked up by members of the law enforcing agencies are political figures belonging to various political parties. The accusatory fingers are being pointed at the law enforcing agencies, the police RAB, DB and Special Branch. And these agencies have dismissed out of hand allegations of arresting illegally or any connection with the deaths.

Even if we were to take the comments of the IGP, that it is difficult to link the disappearances to the agencies as true, then the only surmise is that there is a very well organised gang operating in the country that are able to kidnap people in broad daylight from homes and from the streets posing as members of law enforcing agencies. And this has been going on for a long time. That being the case, shouldn't the police have been more diligent and undertaken measures to apprehend this group?

This situation is unacceptable in a democratic dispensation where the administration never hesitates to paint the obtaining law and order as very satisfactory and better than any time in the past. One would have hoped that by now the government would have been more proactive in arresting the situation. Notwithstanding the remonstrations of the administration the popular perception is quite different. And the government must act immediately to stop the heinous practice.

Derelict public buildings

Spare some fund to maintain them

It is a national characteristic to avoid problems until something tragic happens. When it comes to maintenance of old buildings this idiosyncrasy is acutely manifested, especially by the authorities. The latest example of sheer neglect comes from two office buildings in Narail -- a post office and a sub post office, one built 27 years ago and the other 120 years ago! While we are all for keeping ancient buildings as heritage sites, to retain them without hardly any repair work done and keep them functioning, is the grossest form of neglect.

The buildings in question are dilapidated with cracks in the walls, rods sticking out of roofs, precariously hanging cables, plaster falling off - all the ingredients needed for a disaster to happen. For the 24 staff members who continue to work there, the fear of losing their lives due to a sudden collapse is very real. Yet the authorities seem least bothered about the risk to the lives of their employees and the continuous damage to valuable, historical documents getting damaged by rain water leaking through the walls.

This seems to be a typical attitude of the authorities responsible -- to allow buildings to become so derelict that they may actually crumble, and if lives are lost, too bad.

The story is the same for many state-funded buildings, whether they are schools, university dormitories or post offices like the ones in Narail. The hackneyed excuse given for this unforgivable act of negligence is lack of funds. But we all know that the real reason is lack of maintenance culture. Maintenance of official buildings is a routine affair for the authorities of any town or city and if they are so old that they are becoming a risk to people they should be torn down and new ones built.

While maintenance of public buildings is the state's undisputed priority, enforcing the necessary building codes for both private and public structures so people can live and work in safety, is also part of the govern-

Disappearances: A new concern for citizens



SYED FATAHUL ALAM

DISAPPEARANCES of people from their homes or other places are on the rise. The issue becomes a matter of grave security concern

for citizens, if the relatives, friends or people, who watched the circumstances of such incidents, point their fingers at the members of law enforcing agencies as the cause of the disappearances. Just to think that the security personnel of a state are involved in these kinds of incidents sends shivers down the spine of every citizen. That is more so because in case people so taken into custody, as sometimes alleged, by security personnel are neither produced in the court of law for drawing legal proceedings against them, if any, nor returned to their respective addresses after interrogation or for whatever reasons they were arrested.

Of late, such kind of disappearances is no more remaining sporadic. They have become a pattern. And the most tragic aspect of these incidents is that when the relatives or friends of those who disappeared approach the police department to know the whereabouts of those missing people, the officials in most cases draw a blank. Then the worst fears of the family members of the disappeared people become true. After losing all hopes of getting back those missing people alive, the search conducted by their relatives then focus on finding at least the dead bodies. If they are lucky, sometimes the bodies may be found at the most unexpected places -- floating on the water in a river or in various water bodies, under a bridge,

in a bush -- you name it. In other cases, the missing people remain traceless indefinitely, while their parents, children or spouses are left wondering what became of them! Finally, they may be left with nothing, but only hope!

Family members of Shameem Akhter, former vice president Students' Union central committee, are waiting since September 29 last for his return home. He was allegedly picked up by plainclothesmen from his residence at Purana Paltan Line of the capital city. The victim's mother says, so the reports go, that he was bundled into a white microbus from

get the dead body of the victims back. She tells the tragic tale of how her fisherman father, Habibul Haladar, was picked up allegedly by policemen as well as plainclothesmen in the first week of June this year from their house in Morelganj. But the police, as usual, are in a denial mode and say they had not arrested Jesmin's father. The family members could not even get back the dead body of the victim. Comparing her father's fate with the victims of the so-called cross-fire, the orphaned village girl in her utter desperation even concluded that the latter kind of death was better than

They have started counting the numbers of such disappearances and coming with reports on these strange happenings.

According to Odhikar, a human rights body, at least 22 people disappeared in this manner from within the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and its adjacent areas during the last 11 months since January 2011 alone. Of the missing, dead bodies of only 10 persons could so far be found.

Sultana Kaqmal, executive director of a Legal Aid body, Ain o Shalish Kendro, has said that they are extremely concerned about, what she terms "secret killings." Going by the version of the witnesses, the allegation that plainclothesmen are involved in those incidents, it is a matter of grave concern for the citizens. Assuming that such allegations are baseless, she asks, are the miscreants responsible for such disappearances more powerful than the state?

Similar concerns have been voiced by different human rights activists as well as the chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

As they have been doing against extra-judicial killings by elite crime busting units, or other custodial deaths, the media, HR bodies and activists, legal experts and conscientious citizens have again raised their voice against the incidents of disappearances. We are watching it helplessly. But it is totally unacceptable, since it is the primary duty of the state to give security to its citizens. The government must take responsibility for the missing persons and stop any future case of disappearance from happening.

The writer is Editor Science&Life, The Daily Star. E-mail: sfaalim.ds@gmail.com

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in front of their house.

Another such disappearance victim, Chowdhury Alam, a Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader, had gone missing some two and a half years back. He was taken away by people who allegedly identified themselves as Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) members. No one knows anything further about him till now.

How do the family members of the victim take such disappearances? Hear what Bagerhat district's Jesmin Akhter, 22, has to say about her father's disappearance six months back. In her own words: "Even a cross-fire death is better than disappearance." Her logic for such strange conclusion is that in the case of the so-called 'cross-fires', they can at least

what had happened to her father.

Where will this hapless girl, or others like her go, if the law-enforcement officials express their ignorance about the whereabouts of the disappearance victims? Even if they are unaware, should they not immediately record the complaints of disappearance so made and mount investigation into it? And when accusing fingers are being pointed at the members of the law enforcing agencies themselves, should they continue in their silence or debunk the mystery shrouding the missing persons by finding out the real miscreants behind the incidents?

With the rise in their frequency, the disappearance cases have drawn the attention of the human rights bodies.

The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Hope in the age of man

EMMA MARRIS, PETER KAREIVA, JOSEPH MASCARO and ERLE C. ELLIS

SCIENTISTS interested in drawing attention to the human transformation of planet Earth have begun calling the current geological epoch the Anthropocene -- the age of man. Naming an epoch is serious business -- and in this case the new name is well deserved, given humanity's enormous alteration of the Earth.

We have acidified the oceans and changed global climate with our use of fossil fuels. We have bent more than 75% of the ice-free land on Earth to our will. We have built so many dams that half of the world's river flow is regulated, stored or impeded by human-made structures. We have transported plants and animals hither and yon as crops and livestock and as accidental stowaways.

Some environmentalists see the Anthropocene as a disaster by definition, since they see all human changes as degradation of a pristine Eden. If your definition demands that nature be completely untouched by humans, there is indeed no nature left.

But in fact, humans have been changing ecosystems for millennia. We have learned that ecosystems are not -- and have never been -- static entities. The notion of a virgin, pristine wilderness was understandable in the days of Captain Cook -- but since the emergence of modern ecology and archaeology, it has been systematically dismantled by empirical evidence.

Yet even scientists are still misled by the idea of an untouched, natural paradise. A paper published in October by a group of scientists at the University of California, Davis, in the

journal Conservation Biology criticises the idea of the Anthropocene because it leaves "the impression that nowhere on earth is natural" and because "the concept of pervasive human-caused change may cultivate hopelessness in those dedicated to conservation and may even be an impetus for accelerated changes in land use motivated by profit."

We defend the term "Anthropocene," and we do not accept the argument that the con-

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cept opens the floodgates of unrestricted development. To assert that without the ideal of pristine wilderness, humanity will inevitably go on ruining our best-loved landscapes is analogous to Dostoyevsky's dictum that without God, everything is permitted.

Yes, we live in the Anthropocene -- but that does not mean we inhabit an ecological hell. Our management and care of natural places and the millions of other species with which

we share the planet could and should be improved. But we must do far more than just hold back the tide of change and build higher and stronger fences around the Arctic, the Himalayas and the other "relatively intact ecosystems," as the scientists put it in their article.

We can accept the reality of humanity's reshaping of the environment without giving up in despair. We can, and we should, consider actively moving species at risk of extinction

can do this even as we continue to fight for international agreements on limiting the greenhouses gases that are warming the planet.

The Anthropocene does not represent the failure of environmentalism. It is the stage on which a new, more positive and forward-looking environmentalism can be built. This is the Earth we have created, and we have a duty, as a species, to protect it and manage it with love and intelligence. It is not ruined. It is beautiful still, and



GLOW IMAGES

from climate change. We can design ecosystems to maintain wildlife, filter water and sequester carbon. We can restore once magnificent ecosystems like Yellowstone and the Gulf of Mexico to new glories -- but glories that still contain a heavy hand of man.

We can fight sprawl and mindless development even as we cherish the exuberant nature that can increasingly be found in our own cities, from native gardens to green roofs. And we

can be even more beautiful, if we work together and care for it.

Emma Marris is the Author of Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World. Peter Kareiva is the Chief Scientist for the Nature Conservancy. Joseph Mascaro is a Postdoctoral Associate at the Carnegie Institution for Science and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Erle C. Ellis is an Associate Professor of geography and environmental systems at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 12

- 627**
Battle of Nineveh: A Byzantine army under Emperor Heraclius defeats Emperor Khosrau II's Persian forces, commanded by General Rhaahzadh.
- 1098**
First Crusade: Massacre of Ma'arrat al-Numan. Crusaders breach the town's walls and massacre about 20,000 inhabitants.
- 1911**
Delhi replaces Calcutta as the capital of India.
- 1911**
King George V of the United Kingdom and Mary of Teck are enthroned as Emperor and Empress of India.
- 1925**
The Majlis of Iran votes to crown Reza Khan as the new Shah of Persia.