

Disappearances and secret killings

Creating panic among common people

THE crossfire and custodial deaths-related criminalities have been chillingly surpassed by abduction, disappearances and surfacing of dead bodies with scar-marks of third degree methods -- all enacted in cloak and dagger manner. It is just not enough to say that citizens have started panicking, they are growing apprehensive of newer forms of brutalisation and exaction of vendetta that is complete anachronism in a democracy.

In cases of custodial deaths and cross-fire the perpetrators were easily identifiable but so far as disappearances-led fatalities go, their identities are masked. This accentuates the fear of the unknown which is even more dangerous. The accounts of relatives of the victims and in some cases those of witnesses suggest that plainclothes men picked up the targeted persons and spirited them away in microbuses or some other vehicles.

Whether they are law enforcement personnel like, for instance, Rab, police or detective branch people in plainclothes at whom relatives, eye-witnesses and an Odhikar report pointed a finger of suspicion or they are hired impersonating gangs on a killing mission, we have a serious law and order challenge on our hands. If the killers are hiding behind a facade or lawmen using a new tactic, they couldn't have done so without a nod from somebody and if they are doing it all by themselves then this is clearly running a vicious mini-government within the government.

What is regrettably disquieting is the blasé attitude shown by the home minister to the horrific development. She said she had only come to know of it through newspaper reports. Reportedly, a certain negative attitude was shown by the police in registering the cases whilst the Rab and police have clearly denied having anything to do with the disappearances. Some of the victims have been associated with the BNP or its wings such as Shechha Sebak Dal or Chhatra Dal.

The state has a huge responsibility in protecting and securing the lives of its citizens, their affiliations or track records regardless. If lawmen should take law into their own hands or fail to rein in gangs doing it then the state's authority is laid open to question.

The state must not only discourage terrorisation but also be seen to be doing so. That is the big challenge before the government; for, if people can carry out abduction and killing missions with impunity this smacks of the imagery of death squads in parts of Latin America.

We must put this blatant and dangerous abuse of power to end at once while the culprits are exposed and sternly dealt with after a no-nonsense investigation.

Concern over infant deaths

Anomalies in child healthcare need removing

IN the last 15 days Meherpur Sadar Hospital registered 23 neo-natal deaths. The unofficial figure may be even higher. The heart-wrenching reality is that 11 of these infants died while receiving medical care in incubators.

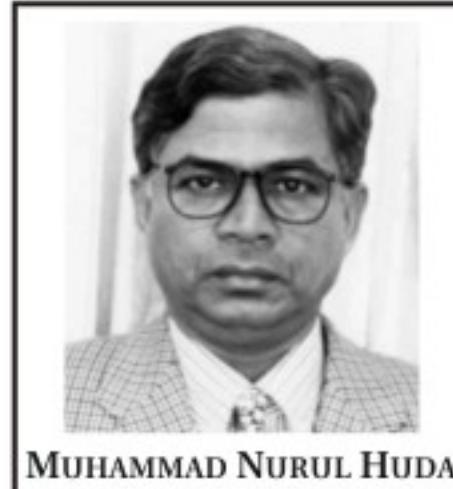
This horrifying detail speaks a lot about the state of child care in the outlying areas of the country. What is debilitating for these mafatlal town hospitals is the lack of technicians with the know-how to operate life saving equipment like incubators in neo-natal intensive care units. Lack of doctors and nurses has already been a major reason for a dismal state of affairs in hospitals outside the capital. This is only compounded by dearth of technicians.

The picture in the metropolis can sometimes give a jolt. Only last week, a six-day-old baby girl was pulled down by a cat from a phototherapy machine at Dhaka Shishu Hospital and dragged halfway to the exit. This shocking tale only reflects on negligence even at the country's major hospital for children.

Child healthcare is crucial for the country's future. In that context, the Expanded Programme of Immunisation (EPI) has earned laurels for Bangladesh as an outstanding success story as part of universal childhood immunisation. It is, therefore, ironic against this backdrop that children should die for want of proper medical care or use of medical equipment. Sometimes we even hear of lifesaving equipment rusting away in small town hospitals because no one knows how to use them.

We have heard the news of doctors being appointed in a large number. Equally we believe, some complementary steps should be taken to provide trained nurses and support staff including technicians if we are to provide efficient ser-

Go for real democratic values



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

SWORN democrats have cogent reasons to worry under the prevailing socio-political circumstances wherein

mainstream politicians are not on talking terms, not to speak of engaging in meaningful dialogue to resolve contentious issues. While such issues are more than one, we are witnessing increasingly vituperative deliberations from partisan platform. The innuendos and the clearly disparaging remarks do not bode well for our fledgling democracy.

Our leaders are bemoaning the lack of probity and propriety in public affairs without engaging in durable solutions required to correct the maladies afflicting broad sections of citizens. Such leaders that are forewarning about unstable future, whether openly or from behind, do not appear to appreciate that we as a nation need to look inward to see how best we can correct the damage which we have inflicted on our domestic institutions as well as our international reputation. There is no sense of urgency for a process of collective self-appraisal to set in.

The apparent do-gooders are not insisting on the major political parties to move away from the culture of revenge and retribution. There is no doubt that our political players need to abandon their hunger for vengeance in response to their sense of victimisation by the opponent. Those at the receiving end do not say that they will not seek retribution against the present rulers for the alleged oppression now visiting them.

Political leaders and civil society spokespersons who are worried about dark days ahead do not tell us in

specific terms that an elected government cannot afford to be viewed as putting itself above the law disregarding the principles underlying the constitution. The indemnity ordinance of the not-too-distant past under a clear democratic dispensation did great damage to the institutionalisation of governance or the image of the government and the

despised elite that were earlier accused of all the malfeasances.

The sad reality is that unrepresentative rule could achieve little improvement in governance in the domain of improved efficiency, transparency or accountability in public administration. Such reality has not, however, damped those who are incapable of establishing

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JASHIM SALAM / DRIK NEWS

country.

We are hearing charges of governance failure by the elected regime. However, going by experience in the sub-continent it becomes clear that the military rulers or extra-constitutional quarters that aspired to end corruption and practice good governance, had to ultimately resort to clandestine and illegal measures in close collaboration with the same

their representative credentials.

There are also elements who want to fish in troubled waters. They look for opportune times to restore their diminished political fortunes and enhance private gain. It needs to be impressed that undemocratic arrangements aggravate governance problems by adversely impacting the sustained opportunity for democratic practice to take root through a

process of trial and error. Any advocacy to justify unrepresentative rule would be counter-productive to the sustainability of democratic process.

Our experience shows that when unrepresentative rule ends it ensures the return of the old political order that appears re-legitimised and is hailed as protection of democratic rights. This is not unusual because the old leaders and their political workers retain links with the voters at ground level. This link cannot be substituted by any other arrangement.

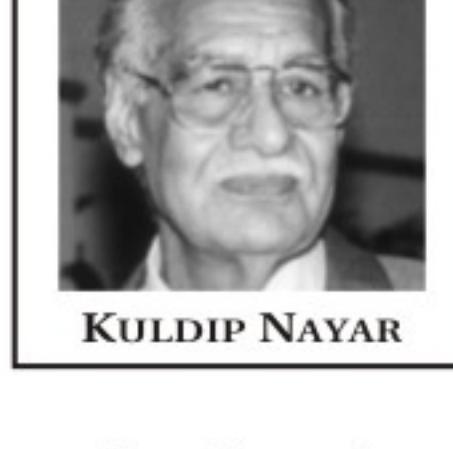
We have to remember that people in our environment vote for political parties and it is predominantly the politicians that can influence the state machinery to provide service for people. The fact of the matter is that political parties and their workers are the effective link between the voters and the state, and are indispensable in representative arrangements.

Events of the recent past indicate that un-constitutional intervention is no answer to the failure of governance in our region. At the same time democratic governance as is practiced now holds no immediate promise for improvement. As unrepresentative intervention would not produce solutions, democrats have to assume their own responsibilities with a view to providing desirable standard of governance.

One cannot support the prevalent wisdom of laying all the blame at the door of the politicians for all our public woes because deficient democracy and mal-governance cannot be exclusively attributed to the political class. Apparently, concerned politicians and civil society leaders should not seek palliatives or cosmetic solutions. Such preference will only prolong our agony of mal-governance.

The writer is a Columnist of The Daily Star.

A fresh poll needed



KULDIP NAYAR

THERE is not a shred of doubt that the Manmohan Singh government would have fallen last week if it had

persisted in going ahead with Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in retail. The opposition came together and the government was reduced to 206 in the 545-member house. A similar fate can confront the government if it does not improve upon the diluted bill to set up the institution of Ombudsman (Lokpal) to deal with corruption. Once they span their differences, the government can face the same situation as it did on FDI. Behind-the-scenes efforts have not stopped to bring down the government. Permutations and combinations are being worked out and it looks difficult for the government to last the full term up to May, 2014. The threat has already affected the functioning of government. Decisions are taking long time and there is a paralysis in the administration. It looks as if it is the momentum which is keeping it going.

Most political parties, particularly the BJP, have taken the advantage of Gandhian Anna Hazare's movement on the Lokpal bill, which brought out once again thousands from civil society on the streets. Except the National Congress Party (NCP) of Maharashtra (9), the Trinamul Congress of West Bengal (19) and the DMK of Tamilnadu, (16) almost all political parties from left to right commanding the strength of 201 joined Hazare on the same platform. The Congress-led government has 248 in tow, missing the half way mark of 272. Therefore, the government cannot take bold decision which the situation demands. The Congress is justified in alleging that Hazare's movement has got politicised. The party has also a point when it says that such pressures

tell upon the democratic method of achieving the end. However, I do not accept the charge that Hazare has

political gains in view. The more the Congress trumps up such allegations the less will be its credibility.

Yet the Congress has itself to blame for the development because the Lokpal bill it has brought before Parliament is neither fish nor foul. It goes against the assurances the Congress gave to Anna Hazare (prime minister endorsed those through a letter). The "sense of the house," as Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee spelled out in a resolution to enable Hazare to break his fast, was:

(i) Citizen's Charter including his right to have water and electricity, (ii) the lower bureaucracy under Lokpal and (iii) establishment of Lokayuktas in the states. The bill has conceded only one point, which is the appointment of state Ombudsman (Lokayukta).

Now that the bill is being amended, the Congress should introspect why it could not read the mood of political parties and the public. The party has lost face by first insisting to keep the lower staff as well as PM out of ambit of Lokpal and then surrendering within 48 hours. (Former Prime Minister Inder Gujral is opposed to having PM under Lokpal. He says that the PM has so much information accumulating at his table that he cannot afford to share anything with anyone, including Lokpal, because by doing so he may harm national interest).

It seems that the Parliamentary Standing Committee which gave

bones to the bill had provided for keeping the lower staff and the PM under Lokpal. But the last minute intervention by Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, deleted both the points. Belatedly, the Congress has denied this but only after Hazare's repeated charge that Rahul had diluted the Lokpal bill. The contradiction has no validity until Rahul himself replies to the charge.

Yet the sticking point is the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). This is an instrument which every government has used against opponents at the centre and in the states. CBI is under the personnel department of the central government, that means the ruling party. Rulers have misused CBI to sustain their majority in the Lok Sabha or the state legislatures. Even governments of different colours have been destabilised through CBI. Sharad Yadav, a leader of Other Backward Classes (OBC) has been

honest enough to say on the floor of the house that they too misused CBI when they were in power. In fact, it is time that all political parties realise that the destabilisation of elected governments does not augur well for them or the country.

On the other hand, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee has warned that without political stability, economic stability is not possible. One can see that. The country is going down the hill as far as the economy is concerned. Industrial growth rate has slipped to 5.1%, the lowest in the last two years. The growth of GDP is just above 7%, which is the minimum if the nation does not want to see the

lay offs and dire unemployment. India is no more considered a good place for investment. The licking that the rupee is getting shows that.

The Manmohan Singh government will have to make many compromises to stay in power. This may entail the economic packages to Trinamul Congress, the DMK or smaller parties. This is not good for the country's health, economically or politically. The Congress is right when it blames the opposition for stalling parliament and not letting the key bills to be passed. Indeed, the opposition's role is negative when the nation faces a difficult hour. But then the opposition is interested in coming to power by hook or by crook, not in pushing the economy.

In the process, people are suffering and missing pace and progress in development. On the chessboard of politics, the different parties are busy playing the game in such a way that they sustain their strength and project their own interest even if it means stagnation for the nation. No doubt, they do not want to face election because of uncertainty of the outcome. But there does not seem to be any other way to get out from the mess, which the non-governance of rulers and non-cooperation of the opposition has brought about.

The electorate has no faith in what the government claims and no confidence in what the political parties promise. People want a parivartan (change). Hazare's agitation has awakened them to the misdeeds of those in power or those who are outside it. Fresh election may throw up new faces, new parties and new combinations. There may well be a manthan (churning). Some dirt is bound to come out. This is good for the nation. Ultimately, things will settle down to usher in a new chapter, new environment and new vigour. There is no alternative to new elections.

The writer is an eminent Indian Columnist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 17

1398

Sultan Nasir-u Din Mehmud's armies in Delhi are defeated by Timur.

1903

The Wright Brothers make their first powered and heavier-than-air flight in the Wright Flyer at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

1927

Indian revolutionary Rajendranath Lahiri was hanged to death in Gonda jail of U.P. in India 2 days before the scheduled date.

1928

Indian revolutionaries Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru assassinate British police officer James Saunders in Lahore.

1961

History of Goa: Operation Vijay India seizes Goa from Portugal.

2010

Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. This act became the catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution.