

Pressing urgency for police reform

Political will is the key

HIGH ranking police officials subjected their force's conduct to a measure of self-examination and introspection at a closed-door discussion on law and order on the occasion of Police Week-2012 on Tuesday.

We consider it a welcome development from what used to be generally a mode of self-denial, as though, echoing the government's line. They can only change when they look at their performance self-critically and acknowledge the allegations of corruption, negligence, public harassment, power abuse and poor service being usually made against them.

The Prime Minister in her speech has pointed to the need for increasing the awareness level in the police about human rights.

The government leaders often exhort the police to improve their attitude, performance and service, but when time comes for them to act professionally, they are interfered with politically. While doing so, they conveniently avoid addressing the reform agenda, which has been long overdue since the Bangladesh Police Ordinance was drafted in 2007.

The media, the civil society members and retired police officials have been constantly providing their inputs for police reform urging its expeditious implementation.

Far from paying any heed to their chorus of demands, they have continued unabashedly in their old-practice of using the police as a convenient instrument of coercion and fulfilling their own political agenda.

Simultaneous with a qualitative transformation in police training content and motivation grounded in public service-orientations as distinguished from alienation from the people, the logistical and equipment-base of the police force will have to be vastly improved. Their service conditions need upgrading along with salary increases given the very challenging nature of their job.

Contrary to the conventional view of any ruling party that the police should act to the bidding of their political masters, the continuing deterioration of law and order and abuse of power through collusive arrangements can only erode the effectiveness of governance and in turn affect the credibility of the ruling party. So it is in the best interest of the political parties and the nation that the government brings to bear the full weight of its political will on the long-pending police reform agenda.

MP's revolting behaviour

A bad example set

HAD it not been for what the TV report shown about the MP's demeanour one would have found it hard to believe that a gentleman is capable of behaving the way the Honourable Member of Parliament, representing Dhaka-15, did with the crew of a TV channel recently. And when the person at the receiving end happens to be lady, our angst is even more acute. The least the gentleman can do is to tender an unmitigated apology for his monstrous behaviour.

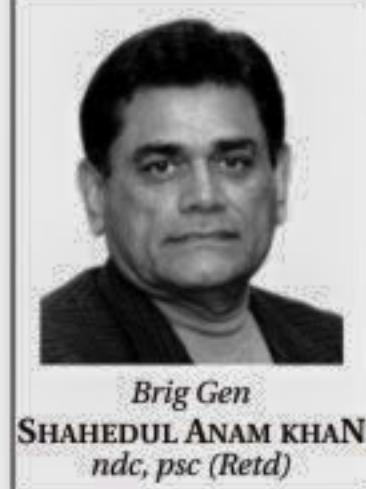
And had it not been for the pictures on TV one would have found it hard to disbelieve what he commented to this newspaper later that he had just recovered from illness and could barely stand up. He said that he was too sick to even lift a cell phone. How could he have assaulted the reporter and caused her injury in the physical condition that he was in? We find his comments full of 'terminological inexactitude'. We all saw what happened.

To say the least, it is an abhorrent behaviour not behoving a gentleman much less a people's representative. Reportedly, the TV reporters went there to ascertain a complaint, which was that a school in Mirpur was charging more than five times what the government had fixed as admission fee. And it was a very civil question that required a civil reply. The response was anything but.

What was expected of him as the chairman of the said school committee, instead of taking umbrage, was to register the allegation and assuage the sentiments of the aggrieved parents. Instead, his behaviour caused the situation to be more charged.

Charging extra money on the grounds of 'development' is not new. We fail to understand why this is so when government schools get government funds for development. And we would request the education minister to respond to the statement of the MP that the increase has the minister's blessings.

Service providers or killers?



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THE shipping minister is loathe to call the drivers anything but service providers. What he fails to understand is that service providers have to go by the rules and ply their profession with a minimum degree of professional competence. And anyone, right from the person holding the highest office of the country down to the ordinary person in the street, who happens to cause grievous harm or death willingly or unwillingly, will have to accept the label that goes with the allegations of killing a person.

One has been watching with unease the efforts of the minister to protect the errant drivers. Regrettably, there is a conflictual situation that the PM must address; a powerful politician heading a powerful workers' body and being a minister at the same time. He doesn't hesitate to exhibit his clout by threatening to resign and take along with him the three million odd transport workers. Would it be wrong to suggest that it is this clout that got him the minister's post? It was deplorable to see him rallying his workers' brigade against a road safety activist, as if it is a crime to demand the assurance of our lives.

And although all the road accidents are not due to the drivers, most of them are indeed the result of unskilled drivers, people graduating from a helper to driver overnight,

and indulging in jiggery-pokery in issuing driving license.

The minister has come in the news once again, and this time by taking issue with one of his colleagues, the communications minister. And his insistence on the fact that there was no need for academic qualification for a driver stems perhaps from his understanding that there are equally, or less, qualified person than one at the wheels of a vehicle in other professions too.

But one can cry hoarse about these issues without coming to definitive conclusion about the minimum level

put their lives in the hands of the so-called service providers.

Bangladesh is the most road-accident prone country and the relevant data will tell you why. Going by the statistics from official sources, 12,000 people are killed in road accidents annually and almost three times that are injured. And the figure of injured is perhaps not correct because many injuries do not get reported at all.

The accident rate per thousand vehicle is even more startling, and I quote, "the annual fatality rate from road accidents in Bangladesh is 85.6

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of academic qualification, if at all, and driving skills. What people want is to arrive safely, and in one piece, to their destinations. And that, going by the statistics of fatalities in the last week of December 2011 only, is becoming less and less probable. Anyone who has travelled by bus on inter-district routes would agree that what is surprising is that the number of accidents is not more. My own experience is that it is only providence and prayers of my loved ones which see me through a tortuous, and a mental and physically enervating, bus journey. And there are many people more compelled than I to take the bus and

per 10,000 vehicles, which contrasts poorly even with 47.7 in Myanmar and 62.7 in Nepal. The fatality rate in Bangladesh from road accidents specially contrasts with the developed countries where the number of vehicles is many times higher. The fatality rate in those countries is below 3 per 10,000 vehicles."

But it is also true that the drivers are not alone to be blamed for the accidents. The communications ministry, and in particular the R&H Division has a lot to answer for in this regard. That this body has been doing less than its duty and deliberately defaulting on its responsibility

is immensely illustrated in its very amusing plea to the communications minister recently that it should not come within the ambit of any external investigation agencies. Why fear external inquiry if one has nothing to hide?

Likewise, the police cannot absolve itself from the responsibility for the deaths. To see buses without tail lights or indicators and even brake lights is not an exception but the rule. Where are the highway patrols and what is the BRTA doing?

Providing safer roads is not doing a favour but ensuring a right. And any government that cannot stop the recurring accidents and loss of life is failing in its bountiful duty to ensure citizens' safety. The situation can be improved only by the collective efforts of all the relevant persons and agencies.

It is everyone's remit to ensure safer roads, and the shipping minister cum the executive president of Bangladesh Sharak Paribahan Sramik Federation would do well to shed his obtuse attitude, stop defending the indefensible and ensure that the drivers are trained well before given the responsibility of holding the wheels. Idea of road safety and sense of the rules has much to do with the level of education of the person driving the vehicle. Merely being able to differentiate between a biped and a quadruped is not enough. Have we ever wondered why the fatality rates in developed countries are so low?

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Climate change diplomacy: Challenges and opportunities



SALEEMUL HUQ

CLIMATE change is growing in importance as a significant new arena of global diplomacy at the very highest levels. As a

developing country that is particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change this presents a challenge for Bangladesh. At the same time, as the country gains in knowledge about the issue and starts to tackle it in earnest, it also represents an opportunity for it to play a leading role in the international diplomatic arena as well.

In order to make the most of such opportunities different ministries of the government will need to enhance their capacities on the issue of climate change diplomacy. Some suggestions for action are described below.

As the lead ministry dealing with climate change the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has been playing a leading role on behalf of the country at the meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the annual Conference of Parties (COP), including the recent COP17 held in Durban, South Africa.

Over the years the minister and officials of the ministry as well as expert advisers have gained considerable knowledge of and expertise in the different negotiating tracks and Bangladesh has been playing a leading role at the COPs within the Least Developed Countries (LDC) group to which it belongs. Bangladesh has an opportunity to take over as chair of the LDC group from next year as the chairmanship will move from Africa

to Asia at COP18 -- to be held in Doha, Qatar in December 2012. This gives Bangladesh a year to lobby amongst the Asian LDCs to gain the chairmanship of the LDC Group.

As international finance for climate change from global to national level begins to flow in earnest, the Ministry of Finance, and particularly the Economic Relations Division (ERD) will need to enhance its knowledge of climate change finance, which is different from Official Development Assistance (ODA) with which they

The MoFA has a critical role to play in global climate change diplomacy at the international level through the Bangladesh ambassadors around the world as well as in other fora. It is already clear that almost every significant bilateral meeting between the foreign minister and her counterparts, such as Hillary Clinton, includes climate change diplomacy as an important topic.

The recent ministerial level meeting of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) hosted by Bangladesh and

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have traditionally been familiar.

One significant difference between ODA and climate change finance is that ODA is given by developed countries to developing countries under a paradigm of "charity" (or "solidarity") while climate finance is under a treaty obligation under the paradigm of "polluter pays." Thus, the relationship of Bangladesh's officials when dealing with their counterparts from the same developed countries needs to be very different when discussing ODA (where Bangladesh has to accept what is offered on the terms on which it is offered) from discussing climate finance (where Bangladesh can dictate some of the terms). A good example is the position of the LDCs that only grants are acceptable and not loans (even on soft terms) for climate finance.

jointly organised by the MoEF and the MoFA was an excellent example of cooperation between these two ministries.

The foreign ministry needs to provide regular briefings on climate change diplomacy to its missions abroad and in the longer term should send some junior officers for higher studies in climate change diplomacy.

The prime minister is already finding that climate change is a regular topic on the agenda of her meetings with other heads of state and she is quite knowledgeable on the topic. However, given the importance of this topic for Bangladesh in future, she should consider appointing a personal "Special Climate Change Envoy/Adviser" to represent her at important high level international meetings.

A number of both developed as well as developing countries have appointed such "special climate change envoys/advisers." The skills needed for such a position are those of diplomacy, especially within the UN system, rather than scientific expertise. So a current, or former, senior diplomat who has been posted to either New York or Geneva would be a suitable candidate for such a position.

It is often forgotten how critical a role a single individual, who is both knowledgeable and respected by others, can play at the international level, even if the country he or she comes from is not the biggest or richest. A good example of such a person is the former Indian diplomat, Chandrashekhar Das Gupta, who was involved in the pre-UNFCCC negotiations which took place in Geneva when he was a relatively junior diplomat based in Geneva and would represent India. Subsequently, he became an ambassador, but no matter where he was posted the Indian government would bring him to lead their delegation to the COP every year due to his historical knowledge and contacts.

Even after he retired a few years ago, the government of India would still bring him to the COP in an advisory capacity -- such was the respect in which he was held by negotiators from other countries.

If the prime minister and the government are willing to be proactive on this issue it is quite possible that in a few years time Bangladesh may also produce such a universally respected individual in climate change diplomacy at the global level.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 5

1896

An Austrian newspaper reports that Wilhelm Röntgen has discovered a type of radiation later known as X-rays.

1912

The Prague Party Conference takes place.

1925

Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming becomes the first female governor in the United States.

1968

Alexander Dubcek comes to power: "Prague Spring" begins in Czechoslovakia.

1971

The first One Day International cricket match is held between Australia and England at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.