

BITTER TRUTH

New spurt in campus violence



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WHILE we condole the tragic death of Zubair Ahmed and sympathise with the bereaved family, we can only ponder over the consequences of an unbridled rise of criminal groups in different campuses as a result of the total indifference of the administration to such gangsterism proliferating with alleged patronage of the university administration, in some cases.

Reports suggest that the killer group Shamim-Sharif faction of the BCL unit at JU enjoys the blessings of the incumbent vice-chancellor although it was gathered that the JU unit of BCL has been kept suspended since July, 2010. People are not unfamiliar with such violence erupting in the campuses of the universities and colleges in the country, yet the present one in the context of devilishness far exceeds the previous ones.

Jagannath University has been witnessing bloody feuds for the last six months, mostly initiated by the BCL factions, that have left hundreds injured, and with violence still going unabated the number continues to mount. Comilla University, and Shahjalal University have been closed because of conflicts between BCL and Chatra Shibir. The violence that erupted in Buet in the early part of January as a consequence of attack on a student by some activists of Chatra League was brought under control by expelling the guilty students for good.

The spurt of violence in different universities, resulting in the killing of a student in Jahangirnagar and suspension of academic activities in all these universities has sent shivers down the spines of even those inured to such dastardly incidents. Dhaka Medical College (DMC) had to be closed down in April 2009 after factional clashes in BCL that left a BCL student leader dead and several others injured.

Even though the PM, who was the organisational chief of the BCL, had asked the troublemakers to desist from such dastardly acts, they paid no heed. The clashes resulting from sharing of extortion money and tender manipulation caused loss of lives and property and tarnished the image of the government and the AI, the parent organisation of BCL. Having failed to rein in the criminal elements in her own party wing, the PM gave up her position as patron of BCL. But that has not improved the situation.

With accountability totally missing, some misguided students in the name of cadre politics have turned the campuses into battlegrounds. AI leaders' assurances

after election victory this time raised hopes that there was a different kind of leadership ready to take on the terrorists and crackdown on the trouble mongers whoever they might be. But has that really happened?

In the backdrop of student groups' involvement in cadre politics, increased violence, tender manipulation and admission business, citizens have issued a clarion call to the political parties for a consensus in declaring

campus violence?"

With violence surging up, extortion spree going unabated and the economy in bad shape, stalwarts in the administration remain silent and indulge in rhetoric that hardly appeals to suffering people. Is it that the massive election victory has caused their leadership quality to atrophy instead of radiating the guiding spirit that the people demanded and craved so



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a moratorium on student politics in academic institutions.

In the sad drama at JU the alleged activities of the VC in fostering student politics, and siding with a faction and giving them a hand in seat distribution and tender manipulation, has assumed special significance. As reports reveal, the VC could have taken prompt action when the Proctor assaulted the president of the Teachers' Association. The way he has handled and continues to handle the JU incident has raised eyebrows in many circles. Tofail Ahmed, tormented father of slain student Zubair Ahmed, laments: "What could be more shocking for the parents than their wards coming back home in a coffin as a sequel to

much? Having a student wing in the party, far from being an asset is destroying the party's image. The people ask the government to choose between the criminals and them.

In the worst of times, in the national context, draconian laws are framed. But when it comes to implementation, precious little is done. Since this government came to power, people saw in stunned disbelief the most audacious acts of terrorism in the campuses relating to issues not at all linked to studies. Most of these criminals operating in the name of student community have been escaping arrest and punishment. In most cases they enjoy the patronage of some politicians. As it turns out, a crime today is a low-risk, high-return business.

With more than 90% chance that one will not be convicted, it's no wonder that these youngsters don't think twice before committing a crime. Despite the PM's stern warning, criminals are operating with greater ferocity and vengeance. Otherwise, how come the identified killers of Nasim are out on bail and moving freely in the campus as reported in the *Prothom Alo* on January 15. Is it that the administration is incapable of taking action against the criminals bearing the label of a ruling political party?

People recall the time when students in our country had to abandon their studies and respond to the call of the time in driving British Raj from this sub-continent. The heroic role that the students played in the historic language movement in 1952, anti-Ayub movement in the '60s, anti-education commission movement in 1962, mass upsurge in 1969 and Liberation War in 1971 can hardly be overestimated. But during most part of the post-liberation days, patronised by a section of disgruntled political leaders who initiated a process of cadre recruitment to serve their own petty interest, often in disregard of national interest, these armed youth have been playing havoc with the lives of peace loving citizens and ruining their own careers.

Bangladesh has now become a cauldron more than a country. The brew bubbling here has burst into catastrophe that drowns all nation building programmes. The warning bells are not just ringing but they are booming the message throughout the country. Everyone can hear these bells except our leaders!

Using the signboard of different political parties, these armed cadres or rather hooligans and musclemen have sown the seeds of a new brand of politics that uses terror and corruption to consolidate power. Almost without exception, colleges and universities also have turned into dens of criminals. The situation has come to such a pass that every sensible Bangladeshi feels outraged, shamed and sickened by the manner in which successive governments have handled this monstrous problem. In fact, godfather politics is a reflection of what is wrong in Bangladesh regarding crime and police administration.

Only a handful of students are involved in such dirty student politics. Citizens and most teachers favour banning, or at least suspending, student politics for some years. Unless efforts are taken to de-link student politics from national politics, there is hardly any hope on the horizon.

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No man's land: Giving *khasland* to the poorest

VISHAL GADHAVI AND NADER RAHMAN

KHASLAND, or state-owned land, is land which the government is entitled to both lease and give away to citizens of the country who do not own land. With an estimated 3.3 million acres of *khasland* available there is more than enough to go around. However the land itself is not the problem, rather it is the process that distributes this land. How to get *khasland* into the hands of those who need it the most is an issue devoid of significant attention, but one where a targeted and sustained change in focus could facilitate a trickle-down process of wealth and asset distribution. However, we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before examining the potential for the future, one needs to better understand the murky context of the present.

Development practitioners advocating for *khasland* for the poorest suggest that Bangladesh has 3.3 million acres of *khasland* and between 6 to 7 million landless households. This means that potentially every landless household could own or lease 0.50 acres of *khasland* from which they could generate an income. The neediest, most economically desperate people in the country are the poorest of the poor -- the extreme poor -- would benefit most from access to and use of *khasland*. The problem is that the extreme poor have little or no understanding that such land is available to them. If and when they do know and wish to apply for *khasland* they are impeded by a process that is so complicated and dependant on local power structures that little is actually distributed amongst the neediest.

The problems with the application process start at the very beginning. In the first instance obtaining a '*khas-jami*' form is a challenge -- many District Commissioners' offices do not have copies of it. The form itself is complicated and most applicants are illiterate, further compounding the issue. The supporting documents such as a character certificate from one's local commissioner, photos and national ID card are also difficult to attain. A significant concern is that *access* to information for the extreme poor about

khasland from local offices is almost nonexistent.

Furthermore, only five categories of landless people can apply and often these categories are limiting. For example, women without able sons and disabled people are not entitled to *khasland*, even though they should be entitled. Yet there are straightforward ways to overcome such bureaucratic challenges. The form needs to be simplified, more categories of people to attain *khasland* need to be added and, crucially, information for the extreme poor needs to be more widely distributed.

After the application comes the processing and currently the transfer of *khasland* from the government to an individual is a complex, lengthy and non-transparent process. Currently, an application passes through several government offices including the Union and AC land offices along with the sub-registrar's office and usually takes up to 6 months. A dual lack of coordination and motivation between these offices and their staff is what creates the time lag. Additionally, out-of-date maps are used to identify *khasland* and a lack of proper records often makes it impossible to categorise which land is available for transfer. Inconsistencies in land related data at the union, upazila and district level also makes it difficult to track and identify distributable land.

Lastly, the selection of beneficiaries to receive land is greatly influenced by local elites, thus complicating the process even further. Local power structures and the ways in which it influences or determines allocation of resources is one of the more complex challenges, requiring a great deal of sensitivity from all stakeholders. These problems may be multifaceted and many, but they are by no means insurmountable. There is a real need to streamline the process so that applications need not go back and forth unnecessarily between offices; there should be fewer steps, improved coordination and increased recognition of outstanding applications so that the process is more efficient. There could also be a nod towards the digitisation of records so that the related offices can easily assess where land is available, as the current maps are outdated. An important strand of consideration

running throughout the process is the need for greater transparency so that each applicant is treated equally and fairly.

When it comes down to finally distributing *khasland*, it seems apparent that there is a lack of political will for the process to be free and fair. In addition, the current policies related to distribution are not clear and often it is the extreme poor who are overlooked and have to suffer as a consequence. The problems start with the fact that many upazila and district *khasland* management and distribution committees have not even been formed, so there is no way they can even discuss which land to give to whom.

Where committees have been formed, previously, representatives of local NGOs (initially part of the committee as facilitators and mediators). However, this is no longer the practice. NGOs working with the extreme poor can be helpful in identifying rightful candidates for *khasland* and as such should be reinstated in the selection committees. Another issue is that the role of the Union Land Office should be clearer. They should be given more responsibility but also clear lines of delegation in order to perform their mandated tasks effectively.

While these are merely the challenges to attaining the land, there are many others to be faced for those who are actually lucky enough to be allotted land. Beneficiaries need to be able to both retain and make productive use of their land, which for most uneducated households is as highly problematic as getting it in the first place.

The silver lining to this story is that if dealt with properly, *khasland* could potentially be the turning point in rural development and wealth distribution that this country desperately needs. The government constantly talks up its pro-poor strategies and now it needs to put its money where its mouth is. In short, what is desperately needed is a streamlined *khasland* policy which is both easy to administer and execute alongside renewed political will in favour of the bottom 10% of the country. The time to act is now.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

How great was 2012!

BRUCE HANDY

HAPPY New Year! And I really mean it! Because 2012 is going to be the best year ever! Seriously! I know, because I'm a person from the future! And here in the future, guess what? It's 2112 and we're celebrating the centennial of 2012! That's how amazing 2012 is going to be!

You 2012ers are so lucky! Where to start? Politics? Your 2012 presidential election has gone down in history for all the right reasons! Our students still memorize Newt Gingrich's famous "(POUND)EpicObamaFails" tweet, revered by all for its eloquence and erudition!

Same thing with Mitt Romney's South Carolina 20-Second Robocall Address! Because unlike most 21st-century elections, your 2012 campaign was fought on a battleground of principled insinuation, thoughtful pandering and only occasional pistol-whippings!

Also, your 2012 candidates refused to make a criminal issue of one another's religion! No aspirant to higher office was stoned, doused or burned at the stake! At least from a major party!

But that's not all! We in the future remember 2012 as the year the American economy finally got back on track! The same can-do spirit that built the transcontinental railroad and designed the computer chip managed to slap together a barter system that remains the envy of the organized world! Plus, whole new classes of jobs were created in 2012! Certified public organ donor! Accredited squatter! 7-Eleven clerk practitioner! The jobs that defined the 21st century!

And who can forget the London Olympics? Truly, yours was an era when athletes still hewed to noble

ideals of sportsmanship and human ideals of DNA! A full 57 percent of 2012's medals were not voided by subsequent drug or chromosome testing a record that has stood for 100 years and counting! You should be proud, 2012! Plus, you still had a London!

The arts! Oh my gosh, the arts! How we in the 22nd century envy you the chance to see "The Real Housewives of Orange County," Season 7, for the very first time! No spoilers here! But more to the point, how we envy you the chance to see it, period! Thank God for the oral tradition! And meanwhile, enjoy your electricity, 2012!

And speaking of periods and semi-colons 2012 was the year we finally got rid of them! Yay, 2012!

Even the weather in 2012 was memorably awesome! Sweden enjoyed its last hurricane-free summer! They still talk about it in what's left of Stockholm!

There's so much more I want to tell you! But I have to get back to the New York of 2112 so I can help the Lexington Avenue Tribe fend off the giant undead flesh-eating mayor-for-life Michael Bloomberg! What? I didn't say anything about the giant undead flesh-eating mayor-for-life Bloomberg? He's not so bad, once you get used to him! And his appetite! You'll see! Soon! We just leave him offerings on his side of the Great Fifth Avenue Wall! That's what we farm children for, when we have dry land!

Anyway, I swear: You'll love 2012! I mean, with a year like that and I didn't even mention how all the radiation from Korean War II was successfully limited to just the Northern and Eastern Hemispheres! how could you not?

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