

BITTER TRUTH

Journalist killings



WHEN on the morning of February 12 newspapers ran the news of the gruesome killing of a journalist couple Sagar Sarwar and his wife Meherun Rani in their Rajabazar apartment in the city, people went numb with shock, horror and panic. Once in a while death becomes a matter of more than personal grief to the bereaved family. It comes as a cruel reminder of the social disruption in the country. In a media-driven environment, private distress is often catapulted into public arena. Most ominously, when media people are killed, then all hopes for recovery of the society from the quagmire of politics and social conflicts are lost.

The prime minister and the home minister asked the law enforcers to nab the killers within 48 hours. Even if that time is over, people want the law enforcers to proceed with all firmness, seriousness and caution because they don't want to see another "Joj Mia" type of case framing.

If the investigation agencies assert that the criminals could be identified as and when Megh, the 5-year old son of the couple, recovers from the shock and ordeal and narrate the details of the incident as an eye witness, it will be unacceptable because Megh is hardly able to correlate things. It must be realised that the ordeal, trauma and pain this young child has undergone is unimaginable. If the criminals cannot be identified and nabbed because of lack of sufficient clues and evidences, then it makes sense to resort to scientific advances in nabbing the criminals.

Recent advances in DNA profiling, which matches microscopic strands of DNA floating in the alleged killer's cells with the victim's clothes, sweat, saliva, semen and blood and hair can help identify the killer without going through arduous and torturous processes.

In the highprofile rape and murder case of Indra Priyadarshini Mattoo (24), in India in 1996, Santosh Singh, son of IGP Delhi police, was indicted as the perpetrator. Singh confessed to have committed murder after raping her. But because of his father's clout, Singh was acquitted. In the judgment Thareja, the sessions judge, pointed out the shaky foundation of the police casethe DNA reports were fabricated by the CBI and police in collusion with forensic experts,

blood and semen tests were botched, witness examination was slipshod and the CBI had allowed Singh's father to influence the case greatly. As reports reveal, in the Sagar-Rumi murder case, no such clout seems to overshadow the investigation.

The Aminbazar killings and DU student Kadar's indictment in a police case suggest that dreadful lapses of this kind by the investigating police are becoming an alarming trend. And emboldened by such slipshod investigation, outdated techniques and inadequate patrols, criminals are striking hard at the core of urban Bangladesh.

People believe that the clothes or body specimens of both Sagar and Rumi have been collected and preserved immediately after or during autopsy for DNA matching with the suspected murderers. Because DNA matching of these samples are the only clues and evidence that can help identify the criminals with 99% accuracy, they must be properly preserved.

In the case of sexual assault on minor girl Taniai n

Rashid killing in 2002.

Patronage of criminals and a demoralised police force have pushed up crime. The murder of scores of businessmen and innocent civil society members in Dhaka and Chittagong at the behest of cadre politics has struck terror in citizens and the business community. The administration has been assuring stringent measures against killing, extortion and abduction of business people and journalists as well as other members of the society who are up against such menacing brutality and crime, but precious little has been achieved.

Journalists Humayun Kabir Balu, Manik Shaha, Shamsur Rahman and others tried to trace trends in the society and identify the tensions that lie underneath. Killing of journalists appears to be the only logical culmination of years of soft pedaling and apathy to such a grave issue which has totally discredited the administration and allowed criminals and armed gangs to hold sway over the country.

Far from inspiring confidence in the administration, the measures and assurances that seem to be mostly hollow have increased the sense of insecurity among the people. Unless the government takes prompt measures to book the criminals, bring them to justice and provide security to the members of the journalist community, democratic values will be put to severe test.

Given that the present AL-led government has been in power for more than three years, there was so much this government could have done to give governance a new direction, but they did nothing but tinker. Somehow they forgot that law and order was the first priority.

Newspaper reports and human rights organisations have been saying that the crime rate, especially among the youth, has skyrocketed but shockingly, till now, there has been lack of in-depth analysis as to why such trend continues to rise so menacingly in the country.

It has to be recognised that the Sagar-Rumi killing has breached the line between animal and human behaviour. The killing perpetrated in presence of their 5-year old son was an act of such horror and barbarism that there is almost nobody who does not feel personally ashamed and outraged. Peace loving citizens in the country hate chaos and the unremitting violence and lawlessness they see everyday have shaken them to the core.

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Pragmatic view of relations

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CHINESE and European Union leaders will meet on Tuesday in Beijing to attend the postponed 14th EU-China Summit. Undoubtedly both parties have a lot to discuss, notably China's role in alleviating the eurozone crisis, global economic governance, climate change, regional peace and other bilateral issues.

In the past decade, Sino-European relations have experienced ups and downs, changing priorities, and a period of readjusting that has redefined the partnership. Will the China-Europe Summit give new impetus to relations between the world's largest single market and second largest economy? Will the two parties regain the intimacy and harmony they enjoyed during the so-called honeymoon period between 2003 and 2006?

Nearly a decade ago, when China released its first policy paper on Europe in 2003, China and Europe experienced a brief period of intensive exchanges. The same year, for the first time, the European Union launched a comprehensive strategic partnership with China.

However, this honeymoon period soon proved lacking in any real substance. Neither of the two main objectives, namely the lifting of the EU weapons embargo and the granting of market economy status to China, was realised. This made the Chinese leadership re-evaluate their expectations of relations with the EU.

At the same time the EU was confronting the growing pressure of its trade deficit with China and began to call for a more balanced relationship and for China to be a "more responsible player" in global trade. The bilateral relationship had almost stalled when the 2008 bilateral summit was canceled at the last minute.

However, the ongoing debt distress in Europe and the global economic recession has brought China and the EU closer again. With its foreign exchange reserves valued at \$3.18 trillion at the end of December 2011, cash-rich China is regarded by the EU as the potential saviour of its turbulent financial markets and fragile economies. Leaders of the EU and its member states have been actively courting China's support in aiding Europe, in terms of investment into the newly established European Financial Stability Facility and European Stability Mechanism, and equally importantly showing confidence in the single currency and eurozone.

During the forthcoming summit, Herman van Rompuy, president of the European Council, and Jos Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, will certainly follow the steps of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in seeking to boost China's involvement in Europe's debt troubles. China has repeatedly shown its willingness to rescue debt stricken EU member states and the detailed lending conditions and methods will most probably be discussed by the leaders at the summit.

China's willingness to get involved in Europe's debt crisis is based on both economic and political considerations. According to the General Administration of Customs of China, Chinese exports increased 13.4% in December 2011, which marked the slowest export growth since November 2009. Exports of goods and services have been China's central economic powerhouse, accounting for nearly 40% of its GDP. Yet earlier last year, China's monthly trade surplus with the 27-nation EU, its biggest export market, declined to \$11.8 billion in November from \$13 billion in October.

Rising wages in the manufacturing sector are making Chinese exports less competitive and the depreciation of the euro against the renminbi will undoubtedly make the country's exports even more expensive for the European market.

Therefore, it is not surprising that China wants to prevent any further weakening of the euro. Furthermore, China is deeply concerned with the security and returns on its investments in the EU. China will be eager to see their European counterparts providing assurances they will repay Chinese loans or reduce the lending risks by going through a broker such as the International Monetary Fund.

Meanwhile, Chinese foreign direct investment to the EU was \$4.28 billion in 2011, according to China's Ministry of Commerce. Chinese companies can now be found in all 27 EU member states. So safeguarding these investments and the access of Chinese enterprises to the greater European market will also be on the agenda.

Equally important are the political considerations of a closer Sino-EU partnership. The political uncertainty of elections and power transitions in countries such as Finland, South Korea, France, Russia and the United States, is further complicated by the evolving crises in Syria and Iran, as well as the aftershocks of the "Arab Spring" and the US administration's renewed strategic interest in the Asia-Pacific region.

As China starts to assert its global power, a broad political space and a respectful diplomatic environment will be essential for China's rise. Therefore, a closer partnership with the EU and aid to Europe may help to not only expand its influence but also boost its image in Europe. No wonder China and the EU have agreed to highlight the importance of dialogue and exchanges between their civil societies in the coming years.

China and the EU now have a more realistic view of their relations, so they should aim to take pragmatic steps to ensure their partnership is constructive and mutually beneficial.

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Harnessing solar power

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WE started the Solar Home System (SHS) programme at the Infrastructure Development Company Ltd. (IDCOL) in 2003. To date, 1.3 million households and business organisations have been provided with SHS under this programme, and the number of beneficiaries is estimated to be 10 million.

Today, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the 1 millionth SHS installed under this programme at Sandwip. At the start of IDCOL's programme in 2003, the number of SHS in Bangladesh was about 6,000. The progress of the SHS programme is outstanding whether a national or an international yardstick is used.

It would be interesting to note why this particular intervention was so successful, as it highlights some key issues of development dynamics, described briefly below.

Role of the government

The programme was spearheaded by a government-owned financial institution, IDCOL. It received continuous support from successive governments, especially from the finance ministers. It also enjoyed the

blessings of the heads of government. Notably, former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia inaugurated the 50,000th SHS in 2005 at Feni from Bangabandhu International Convention Center via satellite link.

While IDCOL enjoyed full support of the government, it was kept totally free from political interference a prime reason for its success.

The SHS programme combined and harmonised IDCOL's social commitment and responsibility, the global outlook of the multilateral agencies, the grassroots level reach of the partner organisations, the dynamism of the commercial entities, and the technical knowledge of the local experts. In addition, the young officers and employees of IDCOL proved that corruption and inefficiency are not inevitable in a government-owned institution.

Donor relationship

The project also highlights the benefits of a healthy donor-government debate. At the beginning, we had a difference of opinion with the World Bank on the design of the project. For example, the World Bank

proposed that IDCOL should purchase the SHSs to reap economies of scale. Our view was that purchasing SHSs would not be appropriate for a financial institution like IDCOL. Instead, purchases should be made by IDCOL's partner organisations, as they were responsible for installing and maintaining SHSs.

The World Bank accepted our suggestion on the

condition that a study on the prices of SHSs would be

conducted after 2 years. IDCOL's stance was vindicated later, as the study showed that the prices of the

SHS in Bangladesh were the lowest among all the

similar World Bank assisted projects around the

world.

Since SHS was a new concept in Bangladesh, the World Bank also proposed that only new organisations should be engaged in the programme as partner organisations, i.e. experienced organisations like Grameen Shakti and Brac would be left out. We were apprehensive that the implementation of the SHS programme might be very difficult without experienced partner organisations.

The World Bank agreed to include Grameen Shakti and Brac due to our insistence. Clearly, today's achievement would not have been possible without the contributions from Grameen Shakti, Brac and other established players. Fortunately for IDCOL, the Task Manager of the World Bank successfully convinced his management to accept all of our reasonable suggestions.

In 2004, the rapid expansion of the SHS project created a new problem for us. Although funds for loans were available, we ran short of subsidy funds to carry on the project. Incidentally, I was invited to a seminar in Berlin in October. I gave my reluctant consent on the condition that I would be allowed to present a video on IDCOL's SHS programme. As the programme was pre-set, I was allowed to show the video during the lunch break. However, hardly 6 minutes of the 20-minute long video had elapsed when the Chairman of the session asked me to stop. I personally felt deflated, but more importantly, I became worried about the future of the SHS programme.

Later, a German official apologised and said that the Chairman should not have stopped me in the middle of the presentation. He asked me: "How much subsidy do you need to continue the programme?" I explained the development impact of the programme to him and said that we needed about \$15 million. He told me that he would not make any commitment, but would try his best. The Germans later came forward to provide the grant. Now, IDCOL has become a partner of choice for the donors. Besides the World Bank, GIZ, KfW, ADB, IsDB, and SVA are now supporting IDCOL's renewable energy programme.

IDCOL achieved the initial target of installing 50,000 SHS three years ahead of scheduled date and for \$1 million below the budgeted cost. In a congratula-

tory message, Mr. Praful Patel, the then Vice President of the World Bank, said: "Projects reaching their target three years early are very uncommon. When the Project was under preparation, in 2002, the idea that 50,000 SHS might be installed in rural Bangladesh within a period of five years (2003-2008) seemed highly ambitious. However, we now find ourselves proved wrong in the best possible way. This project stands as an excellent example of the transformations that can be achieved by committed people working in a good institutional environment."

Government-NGO collaboration

At first, we were also sceptical about the activities of micro-credit organisations. While implementing the SHS programme, we had the opportunity to work closely and observe the work of their staff. Without any hesitation, they would climb up the ladders to install solar panels on the roof and gain the customers' trust by bonding with them at a personal level. These highly educated and dedicated staff ignored the intense heat or rain to repair and maintain the SHSs and collect installation payments.

Contribution of local experts and media

Like the other World Bank assisted projects, a foreign consultant was appointed in IDCOL's SHS programme. As the European consultant was creating obstacles instead of helping us in implementing the project, we requested the World Bank to withdraw him. When offered a replacement, we said that we would accept foreign consultant(s) only if we fail to achieve the goals set for the project. We appointed local experts who proved to be able to turn the project into a success. Later, IDCOL officials started advising and training foreign officials on solar programmes.

The media was really enthusiastic in promoting solar energy. They provided IDCOL with nationwide exposure, helped in dissemination of the technology (initially some rural folks considered it as magic and were sceptical), and in gaining public confidence. Newspapers, including The Daily Star, television channels and other media coverage always kept encouraging IDCOL and the partner organisations.

The success of IDCOL's SHS programme underscores the importance of continuity of policies even when there is change of government. It also highlights the importance of good institutional environment; healthy donor-government debate; GO-NGO relationships; and support of various groups, including media, local technical experts and other stakeholders. There are bound to be hiccups in relationships with the donors, but the process must be managed for the benefit of the country.

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